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I

Seneca and the self: new directions

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction: the self in Senecan scholarship**Shadi Bartsch and David Wray*

After a hiatus of some two centuries, Seneca has returned to center stage in classical scholarship, and we his audience and critics have rediscovered an inexhaustible source for the reconsideration of central issues in early imperial Roman thought, literature, and culture. The hypocritical millionaire mouthing Stoic pieties, the tutor and courtier to Nero who lost the dangerous game of court intrigue and died at the bidding of his own pupil, the author of possibly unplayable closet dramas prized by early modern playwrights but once interesting to scholars only as derivative copies of lost Greek originals: these shopworn handbook commonplaces shrink and fade under the light of recent work on this enigmatic, intriguing figure whose life and work seem equally riddled with self-contradiction. Clearly it would be exaggeration to lay at Seneca's door alone phenomena like the present surge of interest in Hellenistic philosophy as a practical guide for daily life, the newly popular question of what it means to talk about ancient "selfhood," the widespread reevaluation and recuperation of "rhetorical" forms of writing, and the claim that Roman thinkers (already a polemical formulation?) might have more to offer the study of philosophy than a smudged window into their Hellenistic predecessors. Still, his large and varied corpus of writing provides a richly expansive field for the investigation of these questions – a playing field on which, as in this volume, philosopher jousts with literary critic, metaphorical and other figurative logics clasp hands with dialectical argumentation, and the importance of embedding Seneca in his own cultural milieu comes strikingly to the fore.

To a growing number of scholars in diverse areas, Seneca now looks surprisingly good to think with, and surprisingly different from the composite picture traced by the long modern history of his reception, ranging from early modern enthusiasts (Christian neostoics for the most part) to enlightenment freethinking detractors and their romantic and late modern inheritors. Seneca's inconstant fortunes provoke the main question behind A. A. Long's wide-ranging essay at the opening of this volume,

“Seneca and the self: why now?” Accordingly, we start this introduction with reflection on several of the cues provided by his remarks. Long touches in passing on the turn of the tide against Seneca from the mid-eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, and points to the combined influences of Hegelian idealism, German scholarship, and the shift of interest to Greece as reasons for his decline. Against this background, it is Foucault’s work on sexuality and ancient ethics that emerges above all as the catalyst for revisiting and revising our understanding of Seneca, through ongoing debates in which Foucault’s own analyses in *The Use of Pleasure*, *The Care of the Self* and *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* have come in for criticism and reworkings of their own.¹ For Long, Foucault is the first to make a crucial identification, by pointing to the Cartesian moment in the history of philosophy as the reason for the displacement of Seneca’s “spiritualized” version of self. But Foucault is hardly alone in this perspective: the work of scholars like Christopher Gill, Brad Inwood, Charles Taylor, and Bernard Williams has done much to defamiliarize for students of antiquity the widespread and nearly axiomatic modern acceptance of the Cartesian ego: a model of the self as private, interior, discrete, and possessing a uniquely privileged (because “subjective”) access to itself.²

Among these important recent studies, Gill’s 1996 volume on personality in Greek epic, tragedy, and philosophy has argued compellingly that our reading of ancient literature is deeply skewed by our vernacularized Cartesian subjective-individualist model of selfhood. In Seneca’s thought, by contrast, what expressions of mind–body dualism we find seem to be not ontological but rather ethical, and even there more rhetorical than doctrinal. For Seneca, it is arguably the mirroring other, the real friend or imaginary judge, who alone makes authentic self-examination possible. In this formula, as Charles Taylor points out in his 1989 study *Sources of the Self*, the self is defined by non-Cartesian elements like agency, unity, life-planning and self-awareness. Indeed, in so far as the other, just as much as (if not more than) the self, can function as an ethical mirror to the self, it is fair to say that Seneca’s is a performative self – but not for this any less authentic, necessarily, than the modern subjective self. Moreover, as Long remarks, Foucault rightly proposed that to know was in antiquity as much a spiritual as an epistemological project. One could not know without

¹ See, e.g., Richlin 1992–3, Halperin 1993, Cohen and Saller 1994, Hadot 1995, Larmour, Miller, and Platter 1997.

² See especially Gill 1996 and 2006, the collected essays in Inwood 2005, Taylor 1989, and Williams 1985 and 1993.

self-knowledge, and the *gnōthi sauton* preceded all correct judgment on the world around one.

All this has Socratic antecedents, to be sure, but it takes a new turn in Hellenistic philosophy generally and Seneca specifically. Here, as Foucault made clear, the care of self is engaged in principally for its own sake rather than for the benefit of the community. Here it is a series of exercises conducted on and by the self (*askēsis* in Greek, *meditatio* in Latin) that bring the self to the proper mental state for the would-be wise man. Seneca's self-presentation in the letters to Lucilius, very much in this vein, depicts a private person engaged in a process of self-therapy through epistolary exchange: a shared and mutual process, but also a solitary one. And Long's essay points as well to other important non-Socratic developments in Stoicism, such as an increased preoccupation with the self's consistency over time and an intense focus on the overarching goal of arriving at the virtuous disposition of the *sapiens*. Perhaps not surprisingly, Seneca's stated project of "reclaiming the self" also resonates with our own cultural moment's "ethical turn" in more ways than one. Long invokes the widespread return of an old thought – one that Seneca shared with early modern writers like Montaigne – that a book ought to help us live: a notion we can find currently exemplified on the philosophical side by Alexander Nehamas, Pierre Hadot, and a number of "virtue ethics" philosophers; on the literary side, by Alain de Botton's wildly popular co-option of Proust as a guide for practical ethics; and in your local Barnes and Noble, by the popular self-help manuals that take up surprisingly large amounts of shelf-space.

Still, none of these ancient or modern developments offers an answer to what some critics have posed as the crucial question: is there anything genuinely discontinuous with historical precedents in Seneca's treatment of the self? Is Seneca's a new selfhood, not just in the sense that he equipped literary Latin usage with a new lexicon of individual psychological and ethical development, but in the stronger sense that his turn to the "care of the self" represented a step away from ancient selfhood with its (in Gill's terms) participant-objectivist view of the person? Foucault seemed to answer the question in the affirmative in the third volume of his *History of Sexuality*, but his position has by no means gained widespread critical agreement. Several of the essays in this volume, as we shall see, take up Foucault's claim and respond to it in one way or another. Brad Inwood and Christopher Gill both argue that the hypothesis of Seneca as the locus of an "epistemic break" in the notion of the self cannot be sustained in the terms in which Foucault has suggested. For Inwood, this perspective is largely an effect of literary rather than philosophical gambits in the letters

and essays; Gill, on the other hand, critiques the idea of a new interest in subjectivity and individuality, but points instead to the innovative presence of psychological holism and an ideal of psycho-ethical integration in Roman Stoicism as part of what he identifies as “the structured self.” Other essays, in focusing less sharply on the philosophical ramifications of the notion of selfhood, prefer to approach the issue from an oblique angle that shows how, rather than if, Seneca’s preoccupations seem novel. James Ker would link the Senecan “technology of the self” to an ideology of time-control that helped Roman aristocrats maintain a measure of social and cultural power under the pressure of monarchical rule, while three other essays in the “Roman culture” section of this book (by Elizabeth Asmis, Catharine Edwards, and Shadi Bartsch) all choose to focus on the way in which Seneca borrows and transforms conceptual categories from particular arenas of Roman elite life to reformulate what the Stoic *does* and how he chooses to describe himself. This is itself a startling change of emphasis from the orthodox Stoic focus not so much on figural thought as on reason as the preferred tool of the Stoic pedagogue. Similarly, when Martha Nussbaum discerns, in the unedifyingly dark and ostensibly un-Stoic laughter of the *Apocolocyntosis*, signs of a moral passage from passionate anger to generalized disgust, this potential first preliminary step towards progress in the Stoic devaluation of external goods offers a very novel angle to a recognizably orthodox Stoic philosophical end.

Philosophical perspectives and cultural influences aside, another locus for the examination of Senecan selfhood has been at the intersection of the dramas and the prose work – indeed, the difficulty with reconciling the optimism of the latter with the pessimism of the former has spurred many scholarly attempts to produce a Senecan “unified field theory” that would do a satisfactory job of explaining the former from the perspective of the latter, or vice versa. Behind such a theory we might find, after all, a more readily comprehensible Seneca than the one who never mentions either genre in the other. Accordingly, the three final chapters in this volume pursue different but related issues with regard to Seneca’s dramatic poetry, each finding in the plays a direct or implied dialogue with the letters and essays. Alessandro Schiesaro finds proper self-knowledge to be the purview of Seneca’s tragic anti-heroes, who alone seem to understand and exploit the Stoic notion that emotions are themselves forms of judgments. David Wray links the stylized, intensely affective self-performance of Senecan tragic characters to the techniques of Roman declamatory rhetoric: a set of psychagogic tools aimed at persuasion through force of spirit (*animus*), and a speech mode that Seneca, parting company with Chrysippus the

master logician and other Greek Stoic predecessors, regarded as necessary and central to the therapeutic project of Stoic moral philosophy. And Austin Busch finds, in the tragedies, a place where the imminence of death provides grounds for questioning the certainty of Stoic wisdom offered in the consolatory works, where the meaning of that death would hardly seem matter for debate.

This volume, then, does not hope to provide a single answer to such questions as: What is the Senecan self? Does it innovate philosophically on previous Stoic or Platonic perspectives? What are its characteristics and concerns? Our goal is more modest: in bringing together philosophers, literary critics, and cultural historians, we hope that the very issues over which debate and disagreement emerge the most sharply will come into relief as the crucibles in which the Senecan self, if it is to be pinned down, must take shape. These issues are most notably the following, and we dare say Seneca himself would have recognized them as the pivotal points along which his own self-understanding took form: the tension between Stoic orthodoxy and the pull of rhetorical and literary self-expression; Seneca's manipulation and transformation of Roman cultural assumptions for Stoic pedagogy; the mutually interrogative dialogue of the prose works and the dramas; the *sapiens* caught between political retreat and political intervention; the efficacy of second-order reasoning, the possibility of psychic self-integration, and the ethically charged distinction between passivity and action. A further question that comes sharply to the fore in this volume involves the absence of a technically articulated concept of selfhood in Seneca's writing. To what degree, if at all, should this absence make us hesitate to posit a web of relations at the center of which there finally emerges a distinctively Senecan self, one that stands out not only for the "intensity of [its] relations to self," as Foucault put it, but also for the distinct way in which those relations to self are couched?³ As such, several of the essays in this volume invite us to take more seriously the kind of Senecan self-expression that cannot simply be measured against its philosophical history, but that innovates in both the content and the means of its divergence from that history; others would argue that to privilege this non-philosophical expression in the search for philosophical innovation constitutes an untenable move in the long search for the Senecan self. The debate continues.

Given these considerations, the limitations of any attempt to divide a volume of essays on Seneca according to generic criteria will necessarily

³ Foucault 1986:42.

be evident. Nearly all the individual chapters in this volume are based on the proceedings of a conference held at the University of Chicago in Spring 2003,⁴ and we have maintained the tripartite division of that conference, organizing the essays under “Philosophical perspectives,” “Seneca and Roman culture,” and “Reading the tragedies.” The concerns treated in each of these sections obviously overlap and interact. Philosophy has been making consumers of tragedy into better readers of dramatic poetry at least since the time when a certain philosopher (who was also a consummate literary artist) slyly drummed up an “ancient quarrel” between those two ways of making words about the world. Roman Stoicism, as a set of theories and practices circulating among an elite who had inherited it from elsewhere, was inevitably in some measure shaped by the cultural paradigms of that linguistic community. And however precisely philosophers define the words they use, the broader cultural connotations of a given term inevitably creep back in, bringing with them the cultural ideology and practices of first-century Rome. Conversely (and Seneca would insist on this point), not all philosophical work happens in philosophical language, especially the work of bringing oneself and others to ethical reflection. The reader may well find, in the end, that our three separate sections say more about the affiliations of the authors in each one than about Seneca himself.

With these cautions in mind, then, we might say that our volume starts with a philosophical emphasis. Brad Inwood on “Seneca and self assertion” goes straight to the question of the Senecan “self” and the degree to which it can be argued to innovate on previous Stoic and Platonic traditions. Inwood begins with a reference to A. A. Long’s work on the self in Epictetus, where, Inwood argues, it is difficult to point to any specific novelty in the ontology of the human mind used by this particular exemplar of Roman imperial Stoicism. Inwood then moves to Paul Veyne’s study of Seneca, in which Veyne is quite open in deriving the phenomenon of an egocentric, self-shaping self less from Seneca than from Foucault’s version of Seneca; as Veyne notes, Foucault himself needed to find in Seneca’s writing a philosophical figure capable of self-transformation and self-inoculation against the outside world. Asking if any of Foucault’s large claims about the Senecan self can actually be securely grounded in Seneca’s writing, Inwood then turns to his late work, *L’Herméneutique du Sujet*, in which the sexual and medical concerns of *The History of Sexuality* series play a less prominent role. But the difficulties inherent in Foucault’s approach

⁴ In the intervening time, three have been published elsewhere as well. See p. ix.

remain. One problem here, Inwood would argue, is that Foucault makes claims for Senecan novelty in talking about the self even as he traces such novel aspects back to the early Platonic dialogue *Alcibiades I* – and to its apparent reification of reflexivity in the much discussed phrase *auto t'auto* at *Alcibiades* 129b. When Socrates asks here, “Come now, in what way might *auto t'auto* be discovered?” Foucault would have it that his question means: what is the soul-as-subject? or, more precisely, what is the self itself? Inwood, following Denyer (2001 ad loc.), convincingly establishes that the phrases can only mean “the itself itself.” – so that to discover the itself itself “would be to find a formula which spells out the common feature of those cases in which the expression *autos* can rightly be applied” (p. 50). Here then, there is no reification of the quality of reflexivity, no separate acknowledgment of the soul as subject; and in turn, Foucault’s claims for the influence of this (non-existent) novelty, which he sees as becoming further developed and internalized in the early imperial period, must fall through.

Another common support for the view that Seneca does in fact innovate in his treatment of his own self, and by implication *the* self, relies on his frequent use of the theme of the attention one must pay to oneself, including the dense reflexive vocabulary with which such exhortations are couched (Foucault 1986, 46). Here too Inwood finds no possibility for novel ontological claims; instead, he would suggest, such features as Seneca’s ready use of himself as an exemplum, his emphasis on mental training as part of character formation, and the necessarily autobiographical appearance of the epistolary genre, have worked together to create the impression of a “self” that should be treated, rather, as a literary persona. In this, Inwood shares the caution of the author of the next essay, Christopher Gill, who likewise argues against the recent critical tendency to posit that Senecan drama and his prose both reveal a new interest in subjectivity, a valorizing of the viewpoint of the self over and against the normative perspectives of the community in which it is embedded. Although Gill does suggest that the emphasis on psychological holism and psycho-ethical integration he finds in Seneca “forms part of a larger intellectual and, in a sense, cultural shift” (p. 79), he would argue that that this shift was not a step away from ancient “objective” views of the self.

In “Seneca and selfhood: integration and disintegration,” Gill returns to the passionate self-division of Seneca’s two great tragic heroines – Medea and Phaedra – and finds in their famous speeches an aspect of Stoic thinking traceable to the teaching of Chrysippus and reflected in Seneca’s own

philosophical writing. Both Medea in her final monologue and Phaedra throughout her tragedy exemplify the inner self-conflict and disintegration provoked by the effect of “countervailing rational motives” on a figure who has given herself up to passion. The Stoics, however, posited a human soul not divided into rational and irrational parts, as on the view of Plato and Aristotle, but holistic and unified. How to account for the seeming discrepancy? On an older view, it was simply that when Seneca wrote as a tragic poet, the strong pull of that poetic genre lured him into defecting from the unrealistically and unworkably rationalist suppositions of Stoic psychology (this is one well-rehearsed way of arguing that Stoic tragedy is a contradiction in terms). Mounting one line of defense against this view, Nussbaum (1994, 449–53) has characterized Medea’s indecision at the crucial moment of preparing to kill her children as an instance of Chrysippus’ theory of a unified soul oscillating between two conflicting courses.

Yet Medea’s maternal love and Phaedra’s sense of shame, on Gill’s reading, are not presented as aspects of those characters’ subjectivity. Rather, those attributes of their residual “natural” selves *force* themselves on each character – as objective facts about the world, as forces of nature – and so belong in the realm of a “thoroughly objectivist framework of thinking about psychological and ethical life and about their interrelationship” (pp. 75–6). Gill finds a psycho-ethical model to underpin Seneca’s depiction of tragic passion as self-division by pursuing implications of the Stoic theory of *oikeiōsis*: the developmental process of “appropriation” – coming to be at home in the world – by which humans reach a state of social as well as personal order and coherence. *Oikeiōsis* is a natural process (in the sense that a rational being must achieve it in order to “follow nature” successfully) but an arduous one. And in light of this developmental aspect of Stoic ethical teaching, coupled with its emphasis on the cognitive dimension of passions (as false beliefs about what is choice-worthy in life), it is not at all out of keeping with their rigorously unified view of the self for Stoics to draw a distinction between the “actual” self I presently am and the “ideal” or (better, on the Stoic view) “natural” self I have the potential to become. And in this light it is plausible, meaningful, and no contradiction at all for Seneca, as a Stoic philosopher writing tragic poetry, to depict passion as the internal conflict “in which (in spite of the unified or ‘holistic’ psychological model implied) the ‘natural,’ potentially ethical, self is pitted, sometimes consciously, against the irrational one” (pp. 75–6).

The author of the *Apocolocyntosis*, a violent and scatological post-mortem satire on the emperor Claudius attributed to Seneca, presents himself, to

Introduction

II

be sure, as a deeply engaged political and social agent. His authorial voice however gives few explicit signs of an ethical self troubled by its own self-division, aspiring toward Stoic detachment and coherence, or even possessed of ethical standards sufficiently robust to sustain genuine philosophical reflection about them. In “Stoic laughter: a reading of Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*,” Nussbaum responds to that implicit challenge by inviting us to consider just what kind of laughter it is that ripples through these raucous pages and what relation, if any, that laughter might have to Stoic philosophy. There is a kind of laughter that Seneca repudiates, namely the commonest and most superficial kind, represented in American culture by the “frat boy” who passes through life yukking it up at anything and everything and nothing. But there is another kind of laughter he approves and recommends, with good Stoic and Cynic precedents for doing so. This is the laughter of the person making progress when brought up suddenly short by the disjoint between her own received values and the Stoic ones she aspires to possess. This morally useful kind of Stoic–Cynic laughter can be turned on others, as when we laugh at the story of Diogenes telling Alexander to get out of his sunshine, and also on ourselves, as when, faced with an impudent doorkeeper denying us passage, we check our mounting anger by taking Seneca’s advice to “step back and laugh” at the situation.

The laughter of the *Apocolocyntosis* clearly does not present us with a narrator celebrating his way mindlessly through life. Is his the laughter of the Stoic *proficiens*, then? And more broadly, is the *Apocolocyntosis* in any straightforward way classifiable as a Stoic work? Nussbaum identifies a number of reasons why both questions must, in strict terms, be answered in the negative. But if the politically engaged and therefore angry and hopeful laughter of the *Apocolocyntosis* belongs neither to a “frat boy” nor to a Stoic *proficiens*, how are we to classify this third kind of laughter? Nussbaum finds the start of an answer in the crucial and unforgettable moment of Claudius’ difficult passing from life. The reviled emperor goes out on a great explosive fart and, with his dying breath, emits the observation “I think I’ve shit myself” (*vae me, puto, concacavi me*) – to which the narrator responds with the comment that, whether he did so or not, “he certainly shat all over everything” (*omnia certe concacavit*). Here, Nussbaum points out, the narrator does something more than merely focus our attention on a physically disgusting set of sense-perceptions. He “constructs a parallel between the physical body and the body politic: both have been shat all over by stuff coming out of Claudius. The pre-death political scene is portrayed, then, as smelly and disgusting” (p. 105). Nussbaum suggests that disgust has another important effect as well, on the mode of the narrator’s anger. The