

Elder Seneca: *Suasoria* 1: Alexander Debates whether to Sail the Ocean

. . . allow: to whatever thing nature has granted size she has granted a limit as well; nothing is infinite except the Ocean.—They say that in the Ocean there lie fertile lands, while beyond it in turn are born new shores, a new world: that nature stops nowhere—always it appears in a fresh guise just at the point where one thinks it had come to a halt. These are fictions easy of invention—for the Ocean cannot be sailed.—Let Alexander be content to have conquered as far as the world is content to have light. It was within the limits of the known world that Hercules won his claim to heaven.—There, motionless, stands the sea, an inert mass of nature failing, as it were, at its own limits: strange and frightening shapes, monsters great even for the Ocean, nurtured by that desolate depth, light plunged in the deepest gloom, day cut off by darkness, the sea itself heavy and stationary, stars either vanished or unfamiliar. Such, Alexander, is nature: beyond all, the Ocean; beyond the Ocean, nothing.

Argentarius. Stop: the world that is yours calls you back. We have conquered wherever light shines.—There is nothing worth my seeking if the cost is peril to Alexander.

Pompeius Silo. Alexander, the longed-for day has come—the day on which nothing should remain for you to do. Your empire and the world have the same limits.

Moschus. It is time for Alexander to come to a halt where world and sun halt.—“What I knew, I conquered. Now I desire what I do not know.”—What tribes so barbarous that they have not worshipped Alexander on bended knee? What mountains so rude that their ridges have not been trodden by his victorious soldiery? We have halted beyond the trophies set up by Father Liber.—We are not in search of a world—we are losing one.—Here is a measureless sea, untried by human adventure, that encircles the whole world and guards the earth, a waste undisturbed by oars, shores now disquieted as the waves rage, now deserted as they retreat. A horrid darkness weighs on the breakers; strangely, what nature has removed from men’s sight is shrouded by everlasting night. Musa. Loathsome the vast monsters, unmoving the deep. Evidence is before you, Alexander, that nothing lies beyond for you to conquer. Go back.

Albucius Silus. Even the earth has its end; the very universe has its setting. Nothing is infinite. You must give greatness its limits, seeing that Fortune does not.—It is the sign of a great spirit to be moderate in prosperity.—Fortune makes the limit of your victories the same as the limit of nature: your empire is closed by the Ocean.—How far has your greatness surpassed even nature! Alexander is great for the earth: for Alexander the earth is cramped.—Even greatness has some end; the heavens do not proceed beyond their fixed limits, the seas toss within their bounds.—Whatever has reached its peak leaves no room for increase.—We know nothing beyond Alexander, just as we know nothing beyond Ocean.

Marullus. We are in pursuit of the seas: to whom are we entrusting the land?—“I am looking for a world I do not know, I am leaving the world I have conquered.”

Fabianus. Can you imagine that this darkness cast over all the sea admits navigation when it excludes even the view ahead?—This is not India, nor that fearful assembly of beasts. Imagine the savage monsters. Look how the sea rages with squalls and waves, look at the breakers it drives shorewards: such is the conflict of the winds, such the raving of a sea churned up from its depths. Sailors have here no ready haven, nothing to save them, nothing they know. All that is primitive and incomplete in nature has retreated to this far refuge. These seas were not the goal even of those who fled from Alexander. It was as something holy that the Ocean was poured round the world by nature. Those who have by now calculated the movements of the stars, and reduced to fixed laws the yearly changes of winter and summer, men to whom no part of the universe is a mystery, are still in doubt as to the Ocean. Does it shut off the earth like a band, or does it go round in a circle of its own, seething into those gulfs that are navigable as into breathing holes serving its great size? Beyond it is there fire, which it itself goes to increase, or air? What are you about, fellow-soldiers? Are you letting the conqueror of the human race, great Alexander, enter something whose very nature is still in dispute?—Remember, Alexander: you are leaving your mother in a world that is still subdued rather than pacified.

Division

Cestius used to say that this type of suasoria should be declaimed differently in different places. "One's opinion should be stated in one way in a free country, in another before kings, who need to be given even salutary advice in such a way as to give them pleasure. And even among kings distinctions are to be made. Some can tolerate the truth better than others. Alexander is to be classed among those who are by tradition particularly proud, puffed up beyond mortal standards. Finally, leaving aside other proofs, the terms of the suasoria in themselves demonstrate his arrogance; the world that is his is not enough for him."

Cestius accordingly used to say that nothing should be said that did not show the highest respect towards the king, in case the speaker should meet with the same fate as Alexander's tutor, a cousin of Aristotle, whom the king killed because of a witticism that was both outspoken and untimely. Alexander wanted to be regarded as god; once he was wounded, and, seeing his blood, the tutor said he was surprised that it was not the "ichor, such as flows in the veins of the blessed gods."

Alexander used the spear to get revenge for this joke.

The point is neatly made in a letter of Cassius to Cicero: after a good deal of pleasantries about the stupidity of the young Pompey, who recruited an army in Spain and was defeated at the battle of Munda, he says: "Here we are deriding him—but I'm afraid he may have his sneer back—with his sword." In dealings with every king, one has to be shy of this sort of wit. ...

Suasoria 4: Alexander the Great, Warned of Danger by an Augur, Deliberates whether to Enter Babylon

Arellius Fuscus. What sort of man is he who claims for himself knowledge of the future?

Extraordinary must be the lot of the man who prophesies at the bidding of god; he cannot have been content with the same womb from which we ignorant mortals are born. There must be some overt sign of divinity in a man who reveals the orders of god. So it is: for he compels so great a king, ruler of so vast a world, to feel fear. The man who can frighten Alexander must be great, high above the common lot of humanity; he must place his ancestors among the stars, trace his genealogy back to heaven; god must acknowledge him as his prophet. The personage who instructs men in the future cannot have the same bounds to his life, he must be placed outside all the restrictions imposed by fate. If all these prophecies are true, why do not men of every age apply themselves to this study? Why do we not, from infancy, penetrate to the gods and to nature along the road that is open to us, seeing that the stars lie before us and we can take our places beside divinities? Why do we thus sweat away at useless eloquence, why are our hands calloused by weapons that only bring us danger? Could talents have a better guarantee for their thriving than knowledge of what is to come? But those who have, as they put it, "launched themselves" into the mysterious certainties of fate enquire into birthdays, and regard the first hour of life as harbinger of all the years to follow. They work out what the movement of the stars was at that date, in what directions they scattered. Did the sun stand in ominous opposition, or shine on the scene calmly? Did the moon receive her light full, or was she at the beginning of her waxing, or had she hidden her darkened head in night? Did Saturn welcome the new-born child to cultivate the fields, or Mars as a soldier for war, or Mercury as a businessman for profit, or did Venus nod graciously on the baby? Did Jupiter bear it from low to high? So many gods bustling about one head! They announce the future. Many, according to them, will live long—yet their day has come suddenly upon them when they feared nothing. To others they have assigned an imminent end—yet they have survived to draw breath that brings them no profit. They have promised fortunate years to the new-born—yet Fortune has hurried to do them every injury. For the destiny under which we live is uncertain. These are fictions devised for individuals as a show of cleverness, not from any belief in them.—Shall there be one place in the whole world that has not seen you victorious? Is Babylon closed for the man to whom the Ocean stood open?

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