

over exterior influences of fortune. Power over oneself (i.e. *potestas*, and its opposite, the loss of self-control, *impotentia*: see, e.g., *Ira* 2.2.1, 3.36.3) is the ultimate gain in what Seneca frequently figures as a contest between mastery and servitude; by regular turns, Seneca will work the rhetoric of the master–slave relationship into producing a variety of paradoxical instructions for the purpose of fortifying one's mental autonomy in the face of adversity. *De Clementia* (= *Clem.*) which reads as the counterpart to *De Ira*, puts Senecan philosophy to the most rigorous test when advocating mercy to the person with the greatest political power at Rome, the young emperor Nero. At one point Seneca figures Nero's supreme power as a form of servitude, as he is held in bondage to his universal fame just as the gods are to heaven (*Clem.* 1.8.3). Under scrutiny of the entire world young Nero must hold himself to the highest ethical standards, and show restraint when exercising his power; he should align his power with nature's law (*Clem.* 1.19) while mastering any impulses to cruelty and violence (*Clem.* 1.25–6). In spite of an initially peaceful reign, however, Seneca's exhortational strategies did not sink in. In the end the praxis of imperial life outmatched all ethical principles.

When aligning philosophical values with political and social circumstances, the practical results for the individual self are manifold and far-reaching. Political engagement, involvement with friends and family, and even emotional responses are put to ethical mediation. The guiding principle of Senecan therapeutics is to avoid subjecting oneself to the anxieties produced by political ambition or emotional surfeit. For the lifelong project of gaining mastery over the self Seneca again finds metaphorical traction with the roles of master and slave: you find liberty by serving god (*VB* 15.7), and should follow divine providence rather than be dragged by fate (*VB* 15.6). The fullest implications of freeing oneself from any form of circumstantial bondage will be considered in their most stunning, most harrowing manifestations in the *Epistulae Morales* below. Here self-mutilation and even suicide are proffered as acceptable means of self-control in situations of no escape.

The Care of the Self, unto Itself: *Epistulae Morales* (*Moral Letters*)

Of all Seneca's prose, the *Moral Letters to Lucilius* have proved most influential. The style and content of this massive collection made lasting impressions on pre-modernist writers such as Montaigne, Bacon, Spinoza, Rousseau, and Emerson. From the mid-eighteenth century, interest in Seneca in the English-speaking world would languish, as Stoic thought was interpreted as proto-Christian asceticism, but Seneca continued to affect continental thinkers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

As literature, the *Letters* develop in and through the genre of letter-writing already made popular in Roman culture by Cicero's and Ovid's publications, and take the formal tactics of "epistoliterarity" to a new stage of literary expectation (for the special position of the *Letters* in literary history, see Henderson (2004), Marchesi (2008) 1–16), and Willcox (2012). For one, the letters are divested, resolutely, of dates and addresses, as well as of the transient particulars of current social and political events; by depriving his Roman reader of familiar points of reference, Seneca endeavors to enroll the reader, of his own time *and also* every time, in the arduous process of Stoic therapy. Both

sender and recipient are thereby situated not locally but universally. That Aulus Gellius (*Attic Nights*, 12.2.2–13), writing in the mid-second century, discusses excerpts from a now-lost book 22 suggests, for one, that the letters were arranged by Seneca himself as we have them. But across the surviving 20 books the 124 letters are not arranged according to an ostensible symmetry or pattern. One can “construct” design or thematic resposnion between letters and across books, but epistolary expectations are challenged at every turn as the readerly impulse to systematize textual narratives is put to rigorous, unforeseeable tests.

The format of the epistle, with its fictions of private conversation between intimates, is ideally conducive to self-analysis and self-dialogue: the rhetorical relationship between sender and addressee may be construed as analogous to the ideal, “higher” version of the self offering guidance and counsel to the “lower” part of the self which is in need of ethical improvement. The metaphor holds true only in part, because Seneca frequently admits to his own shortcomings, and is subject to the same conflicts of desires for which his addressee Lucilius seeks counsel. Lucilius Junior, a younger contemporary, one-time governor of Sicily, occasional poet, and Stoic enthusiast, is figured in the most generic of terms, serving as surrogate for each subsequent reader.

It is still in question whether the self in Seneca may accurately be called a “divided self” in a modernist sense. At the forefront of Seneca’s discourse on the self is the prevalence of personal and reflexive pronouns, which serve to figure the self as constantly in dialogue *with itself*, divided between an “objective” version of an idealized, superior self which instructs the flawed, “subjective” self towards psychological holism and conformance with virtue. The opening words of the very first letter inaugurate the enterprise thus: “In this way you must get down to it, my Lucilius; master yourself, for yourself”: *ita fac, mi Lucili; vindica te tibi* (*Letters* 1.1). This overriding attention to the care of the self, in strategy and in rhetoric, has produced a host of competing views on what the Senecan self actually is, and the debate continues over whether Seneca establishes an epistemic break in the ontology of the self between the “participant-objectivist” model of antiquity and the “subjective-individualist” of modernity (Gill (1996) and esp. (2006); on construction of the self in the tragedies, see Buckley in this volume). Recent interest in the nature of the Senecan self was spurred by Michel Foucault (1984), who argued that Seneca was radically innovative in his model of selfhood: no longer subject to the views of the community to determine his personal value and moral rectitude, the individual had the potential to care for, correct, and validate his own self under his own power and assiduous cultivation. This understanding of the Senecan self as a prototype for the Cartesian *ego* – private, interior, in possession of a privileged, “subjective” access to itself – has since been challenged: a divided self is fully consistent with Stoic notions of the self as partitioned into objective, naturally endowed parts which seek rational, psycho-ethical integration (Gill (2009) 65–83), and the Foucauldian emphasis on creativity, volition, and pleasure is at odds with Stoic notions of self-containment (Bartsch (2006) 232–54). Scholarly debate is ever motivated by the uncertainty Seneca himself implants, since nowhere does he technically articulate a concept of the self.

Whether or not the Senecan self is ontologically unique or merely a byproduct of literary technique, the useful potential of self-analysis may be appreciated when we consider various instances of *meditatio* (the internal examination of one’s conscience to induce harmony between philosophical principles and practical challenges), and the

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related mental exercise of *praemeditatio* (the anticipatory rehearsal of enduring future ills; *Letters* 26.10, 37.4, 65.15–21, 104.16). In conjunction with the task of locating one's position in the cosmic order of nature, society, and family, knowing the self also entails eliminating concern for those most intimate and innately human "external indifferents," the body and, indeed, mortality and death. For Seneca, self-knowledge is connected primordially to self-mastery, and throughout the *Letters* he espouses various methods for overcoming the fear of pain, violence, cruelty, and death itself in order to achieve the sublime mental tranquility of the *sapiens*. Death is inevitable and, thus, fated for all; the means of dying are unpredictable and, thus, subject to fortune. But even in the face of death it is possible to overcome fortune, the prime adversary of the Stoic *proficiens*, and gain mastery of oneself by learning to acquiesce to fate willingly. Seneca puts his paradoxical prescriptions to the most demanding trials by adducing a myriad of spectacular case studies, and parsing their most gruesome and graphic details in scintillating declamational detail for their full therapeutic value.

Training one's mind to be indifferent towards the frailty of the body and the threat of death requires an ongoing regimen of habilitative intellectual practices. To this end (indeed, to The End), one should devote a significant part of one's daily routine to contemplating the inevitability of death and the infinite, omnipresent possibilities of dying. In this so-called *praemeditatio*, Seneca advocates that we counterbalance (though, crucially, not replace) our constant preoccupations with those nearest and dearest to us with the constant awareness that we might be suddenly taken away from them by death: "With assiduous effort we should think as much on our mortality as on those whom we cherish" (*Letters* 63.15). The process of the *praemeditatio* requires, literally, "projecting one's mind" onto all future mishaps which are not only likely to be wrought by fortune, but which are simply possible (*Letters* 91.4). Nor, for that matter, should the epistemic separation of the soul from present circumstances be done without the assistance of philosophy; where necessity cannot be avoided, philosophy can open a "path" to gaining control over a compulsory situation (*Letters* 37.3).

Again, Seneca applies the paradoxical reversal of master and slave, in a retooling of Epicurus, to figure servitude to philosophy as the ultimate form of freedom (*Letters* 8.7); the paradox is reinforced when freedom is portrayed as an enclosure, with philosophy providing a wall which fortune's tricks cannot breach (*Letters* 82.5; for the endless reversals of master–slave roles in Seneca, see Edwards (2009) 139–59). One of the most profound implications of rigorous contemplation of mortality is that time itself is collapsed into an eternally present temporality: to fear future ills or to sorrow for past grievances causes suffering in the here and now (*Letters* 74.34; Ker (2009a) 160–87). Only the mental state of the tranquil sage actually shares in the eternity of the divine.

In principle, mastering death by cultivating an assiduous mental acquiescence to its inevitability induces inner peace; the whims and banes of fortune can always be controlled if not avoided. But what if death does not happen in an instant, but under agonizing circumstances? No problem, Seneca says, because history proves that the mind can overcome any bodily pain. Seneca's favorite exemplum for physical endurance (*patientia*) is Mucius Scaevola, a Roman soldier of the late sixth century BC who was captured while attempting to assassinate the leader of an invading enemy. Rather than confess the details of his mission under threat of death by fire, Mucius willingly thrust his right hand into the flames as proof of his fearlessness, thus earning his cognomen

"Left-handed." For Seneca, the legend would become a classic exemplum of *patientia*, analyzed many times for its lessons about volition, physical endurance, and personal integrity. In fulsome detail he describes how Mucius watched calmly as his hand was melted away by the flames to the bare bones until the enemy removed the fire (*Letters* 24.5; cf. 66.53). As his own "spectator," Mucius effectively distanced his mind from the vulnerability of his body, commanding his impossible situation. (On bodily torture in the *Letters*, see Edwards (1999) 252–68; on *patientia* in Seneca, see Bartsch (2006) 164–182.) By rejecting bodily pain as an "indifferent," Mucius reverses his slave-role to become master, and maintains control over his mental integrity under the most severe compulsion.

Mucius was spared death. For the consummate therapeutic lesson – the voluntary surrender to death at the hour of necessity – Seneca draws not from Roman history but from anecdotal lore, recounting the voluntary suicide of a captured German soldier. Sold into slavery to a gladiatorial school, the German briefly excuses himself to the lavatory before a morning training session, only to asphyxiate himself by stuffing a rancid toilet sponge down his throat (*Letters* 70.20–21). This story teaches us that the most disgusting death is preferable to the most tolerable form of slavery, and dramatizes a principle central to Senecan ethics: fate is influenced by the power of free choice, and death itself is embraced as a form of mastery over circumstance. Seneca also indicates the universality of this lesson, applicable to noble-born Romans and slaves alike: in praising the bravery of this man, the use of *vir* suggestively confers on this captive foreigner the citizenship of a free Roman adult male. Here, a non-Roman slave becomes master of his destiny by displaying his contempt for death: the act itself of assenting to and not being dragged by fate redefines his civic and social status.

Since death is inevitable, all that stands in its way is human will. Not long after composing his collections of letters Seneca had to confront his own advice when he was sentenced to suicide by Nero. For all the seeming contradictions between his private lifestyle and publicized morality, the death of Seneca has been received as the supreme example of philosophic self-control – and has echoed through the ages (Ker (2009b)).

Seneca was fond of quoting Dido's dying words, and found an incantatory quality in "I have lived, I have completed the course granted by fortune" (*Aeneid* 4.653). This repeated quotation – self-directed words to die by (*Letters* 12.9; *VB* 19.1; *De Beneficiis* 5.17.5) – instantiates the Senecan mode of reiterative refinement, as he revisits persistent problems about the volitional assent to death, and how to instruct ourselves not simply to cope with but also to master our destinies (on the use of Dido's words in *Letters* 12.9 specifically, see Mann (2006) 103–22). There is no record that Seneca himself uttered Dido's words as he opened his wrists. As an example of how we might talk ourselves into accepting the inevitable, however, this mantra defines what the appropriate Stoic (Senecan) attitude should be towards living and dying: not one of morbid obsessiveness and masochistic behaviour, but one of relief and serenity that comes with the rejection of mortal suffering as the premier act of Stoic indifference. Just as the *sapiens* has mediated his selfhood with the cosmos and various echelons of society, once the self has been reconciled with its own self, the *animus*, that tiny, unquantifiable portion of divine *ratio* in which we all partake, comes to be master over all externals, including the body and its limited lifespan.

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