

Reading Antiquity: Seneca *Epistles* Lecture

- *Epistulae morales*, 124 letters; written for publication; addressed to Lucilius; possibly never sent
 - Written 63 and 64 AD: mix of topics e.g. travel (28, 58 and 104), ill-health, friendship, grief, and suicide (discontinuity and changes of direction within letters but unity from author/addressee relationship)
 - NB dramatic chronology of collection: seasonal references; references between letters e.g. 57 ref to 53; Lucilius' progress; change in circumstances (Lucilius: lawsuits 24.1, retirement from public life 19.1–8/22.1–3/68, the death of a friend 3; Seneca faces old age (12; 26.1–5; 67.1f.; 76.2f.), illness (54; 65.1f.) and the nearness of his own death (26.4–7; 54.4f.; 61; 93.6f.)> change in advice
 - (chronology offered by Griffin p. 400):
 - 1-18: autumn- December 63
 - 19-23: December 63- early spring 64
 - 24-67: early spring- late spring 64
 - 68-86: late spring- end of June 64
 - 87-91: end of July- fire at Lyons
 - 92-122: late summer or later- autumn 64
 - 123-4 autumn 64- before Seneca's death in April 65
- 1) "They tell a story of the growing relationship between the writer and the recipient and the developing depth and resolve of the philosophy of both. The underlying narrative scheme is one of moral and intellectual progress. In the absence of a narrator it is left to the reader to interlink the letters, to discern the shape, the direction, the rationale of the correspondence." (Wilson 2001: p. 185)
- Seneca's *Epistles* as promoting Stoicism (most popular philosophy of time) but not orthodox handbook: how to live. Promoting e.g. mental tranquillity by eliminating of fear of death (need e.g. to manage emotions with the power of reason, safeguard mind against shifts of fortune by considering potential future misfortunes, learn to view things like death as "indifferent" to our mental well-being)
 - Why write in letter form? prose collection written for the general readership = new; effective way of conveying philosophy e.g. intimate tone of friendship; "you" addressee; discussion of everyday matters can lead to philosophy; way of offering guidance (though Seneca does admit shortcomings)
- 2) "We experience Stoicism as revealed to someone else rather than pressed upon us. We aren't lectured at; we aren't even addressed." (Wilson 1988)
- 3) "the epistolary framework enables the writer to give his doctrine a more personalized tone and to establish through the medium of the notional correspondent a more intimate relationship with the wider public." (Coleman p. 288)
- earlier letters e.g. Cicero's letters to Atticus (referred to at e.g. *Epist.* 21.4; 97; 118), Horace's poetic *Epistles*, Ovid's *Heroides*
- 4) "I shall pay in advance, and yet not do as the eloquent Cicero bids Atticus do: "Even if you have nothing to say, write whatever enters your head." For there will always be something for me to write about, even omitting all the kinds of news with which Cicero fills his correspondence: what candidate is in difficulties..." (*Epist.* 118)

5) “Cicero’s letters, addressed to a wide range of friends and acquaintances, are letters in the ordinary sense of the word. Their occasional character is revealed by the fact that they can be dated by their topical allusions; in Seneca such dating is impossible and there is very little in the whole collection that could be securely used even to assign them to the early sixties, when they were in fact composed.” (Coleman p. 287)

- Allusions to people and events could hinder goal of presenting philosophy to wide readership; also linked to emphasis on inner life

6) “Roman public life, the primary concern of Cicero’s *Letters*, the context in which and from which the Ciceronian person takes its meaning, is transcended, transformed into a vocabulary of image and metaphor through which the would-be philosopher’s inner life can be articulated.” (Edwards, p. 24)

- Seneca: revelation and self-revelation. Portrayal designed to help philosophical point; letters prompt self-scrutiny which is useful for developing Stoic

7) “Without the testimony of Tacitus, Seneca the statesman could hardly exist.” (Syme, *Tacitus* (1958), p. 552)

8) “the surviving prose works, though addressed to contemporaries and concerned with practical moral problems, tells us little about Seneca’s external life or about the people and events that formed its setting.” (Griffin, p. 1)

9) “we must admit that Seneca’s picture of his personality in the *Letters* lacks plausibility and consistency: he is more concerned to offer the public examples of the moral preacher, the pedagogue, the struggling student, the zealous convert, than to portray his real relationship with his addressee Lucilius, or record his own moods.” (Griffin p. 5)

- Lucilius: get vague picture. Important as Stoic pupil and surrogate for each subsequent reader

10) “We learn that he was a native of Campania (49.1 etc), a self-made man (19.5), younger than Seneca (26.7) but a friend of long standing (49.1) who wrote to him frequently (31.1 etc), enjoyed travelling whether in his procuratorial duties (31.1) or privately (48.1), scholarly (45.1) and a writer of prose and verse (46.1, 8.10, 24.19ff.), suffered from catarrh (78.1), and was involved as defendant in a lawsuit (24.1). But most of these references are incidental or else introduced as a theme for moralizing, and Lucilius himself tends to fade altogether as a person in the later letters.” (Coleman)

11) “[Lucilius] supplies a focus for the author’s teaching and incitement” (Wilson 1988)

- Style: rich; concise; carefully crafted letters

12) “His works are made up of mottoes. There is hardly a sentence which might not be quoted; but to read him straightforward is like dining on nothing but anchovy sauce” (Lord Macaulay)

13) “I prefer that my letters should be just what my conversation would be if you and I were sitting in one another’s company, or taking walks together, - spontaneous and easy; for my letters have nothing strained or artificial about them.” (Sen. *Epist.* 75.1)

- literary quotations: add interest, bring authority. Seneca finds truth anywhere. E.g. 7.10 (Democritus); 11 (anon; Epicurus); 12.9 (*Aen.* 4.653); 21.5 (*Aen.* 9.446ff.); 28.1 (*Aen.* 3.72); 28.3

(*Aen.* 6.78f.); 53.3 (*Aen.* 3.6; 3.277); 56.6 (Varro *Arg.* adapting Ap. Rh. *Arg.* 3.749-50), 56.12 (*Aen.* 2.726-9); 77 (*Aen.* 6.376); 78.15 (*Aen.* 1.203); 84 (*Aen.* 1.432f.); 90.9 (Verg. *G.* 1.144); 90.11 (Verg. *G.* 1.139f.); 90.20 (Ov. *Met.* 6.55ff.); 90.37 (Verg. *G.* 1.125ff.)

14) “‘Epicurus,’ you reply, ‘uttered these words; what are you doing with another’s property?’ Any truth, I maintain, is my property. And I shall continue to heap quotations from Epicurus upon you, so that all persons who swear by the words of another, and put a value upon the speaker and not upon the thing spoken, may understand that the best ideas are common property.” (Sen. *Epist.* 12.10)

▪ Examples: Epistle 47 (Lucilius’ treatment of slaves> advice about humanitarian treatment of slaves; true slavery = enthrallment to worldly pleasures), 53 (foolish self-presentation, comedy> musing about how serious physical ailments get our attention but not case with spiritual; importance of devoting one’s life to mistress of Stoic philosophy) and 57 (amusing picture; exaggeration; anecdote leads to philosophy)

15) “I am glad to learn, through those who come from you, that you live on friendly terms with your slaves. This befits a sensible and well-educated man like yourself. “They are slaves,” people declare.” Nay, rather they are men. “Slaves!” No, comrades.” (*Epist.* 47.1)

16) “I was suffering too grievously to think of the danger, since a sluggish seasickness which brought no relief was racking me, the sort that upsets the liver without clearing it. Therefore I laid down the law to my pilot, forcing him to make for the shore, willy-nilly. When we drew near, I did not wait for things to be done in accordance with Vergil’s orders, until Prow faced seawards or Anchor plunged from bow; I remembered my profession as a veteran devotee of cold water, and, clad as I was in my cloak, let myself down into the sea, just as a cold-water bather should.” (*Epist.* 53.3; quotes *Aen.* 6.3 and 3.277: humour in gap)

17) “It is hard to believe what I endured when I could not endure myself” (*Epist.* 53.4: shows flawed Stoic)

18) “you may be sure that the reason why Ulysses was shipwrecked on every possible occasion was not so much because the sea-god was angry with him from his birth; he was simply subject to seasickness. And in the future I also, if I must go anywhere by sea, shall only reach my destination in the twentieth year. (*Epist.* 53.4)

19) “When I finally calmed my stomach ... I began to reflect how completely we forget or ignore our failings, even those that affect the body, which are continually reminding us of their existence” (*Epist.* 53.5)

20) “The opposite holds true of diseases of the soul; the worse one is, the less one perceives it.” (*Epist.* 53.7)

21) “Throw aside all hindrances and give up your time to getting a sound mind; for no man can attain it if he is engrossed in other matters. Philosophy wields her own authority; ... She is not a thing to be followed at odd times, but a subject for daily practice; she is mistress, and she commands our attendance.” (*Epist.* 53.9)

22) “When it was time for me to return to Naples from Baiae, I easily persuaded myself that a storm was raging, that I might avoid another trip by sea; and yet the road was so deep in mud, all the way, that I may be thought none the less to have made a voyage.” (*Epist.* 57.1: takes land route through Crypta Neapolitana)

23) “On that day I had to endure the full fate of an athlete; the anointing with which we began was followed by the sand- sprinkle in the Naples tunnel.” (*Epist.* 57.1; wrestlers have oil not mud!)

24) “No place could be longer than that prison; nothing could be dimmer than those torches, which enabled us, not to see amid the darkness, but to see the darkness.” (*Epist.* 57.2)

25) “how much worse the dust is there, where it rolls back upon itself, and, being shut in without ventilation, blows back in the faces of those who set it going! So we endured two inconveniences at the same time, and they were diametrically different: we struggled both with mud and with dust on the same road and on the same day.” (*Epist.* 57.2)

26) “The gloom, however, furnished me with some food for thought. I felt a certain mental thrill, and a transformation unaccompanied by fear, due to the novelty and the unpleasantness of an unusual occurrence.” (*Epist.* 57.3)

27) “Accordingly, as I said, I experienced a certain transformation, though it could not be called confusion. Then at the first glimpse of restored daylight my good spirits returned without forethought or command. And I began to muse and think how foolish we are to fear certain objects to a greater or less degree, since all of them end in the same way. For what difference does it make whether a watchtower or a mountain crashes down upon us? No difference at all.... Nevertheless, there will be some men who fear the latter mishap to a greater degree, though both accidents are equally deadly; so true it is that fear looks not to the effect, but to the cause of the effect.” (*Epist.* 57.6)

28) “the soul, which consists of the subtlest particles, cannot be arrested or destroyed inside the body, but, by virtue of its delicate substance, it will rather escape through the very object by which it is being crushed.” (*Epist.* 57.8)

Bibliography

- Coleman, R. 1974. ‘The Artful Moralist: A Study of Seneca’s Epistolary Style’ *CQ* ns XXIV: 266-89
- Edwards, C. 1997. ‘Self-Scrutiny and Self-Transformation in Seneca’s Letters’, *G&R* 44: 23-38
- Griffin, M. 1976. *Seneca. A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford)
- Syme, R. 1958. *Tacitus* (Oxford)
- Russell, D. A. 1974. ‘Letters to Lucilius’ in *Seneca* ed. C. D. N. Costa (London)
- Wilson, M. 2001. ‘Seneca’s Epistles Reclassified’ in Harrison, S. J., ed., *Texts, Ideas, and the Classics: Scholarship, Theory and Classical Literature* (Oxford), 164-87
- Wilson, M. 1988. ‘Seneca’s Epistles to Lucilius: A Revaluation’ in A. J. Boyle ed. *The Imperial Muse* (Victoria), 102-21 /*Ramus* 16 (1987) (repr. in Fitch, *Oxford Readings*)