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TRAUMA, MEMORY AND WITNESSING IN SENECA'S MORAL EPISTLES

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Abstract: Spurred by the recent identification of papyrus fragments from Seneca the Elder's historical work, *ab initio bellorum civilium*, this paper investigates how Seneca the Younger navigated the imperial realities of Roman memory culture especially in light of the intergenerational trauma born of selective imperial silencing. The study utilizes a trauma framework to analyze the psychic suffering, the lack of meaning-making, and the forced political compliance in elite life under the Julio-Claudian emperors. Against the backdrop of forced theatricality and doublespeak—where living emperors claimed absolute truth and exemplarity while alive, only to face structural denial and vilification upon their deaths—Seneca the Younger's *Moral Epistles* emerge as an innovative intervention. Beyond delivering philosophical advice or offering an alternative version of his own life, Seneca uses the epistolary form to claim sovereignty over his life story and its posthumous reception. By shifting the accountability of *pietas* away from heirs toward a future, transhistorical community of like-minded philosophical readers, the *Epistles* challenge raw imperial power with self-transformation, relational meaning-making and establishing an alternative version of Roman history.

Keywords: Seneca the Younger, Memory Culture, Trauma, Exemplarity, Exitus literature

In an episode worthy of Professor György Németh's interests and flair, just ten years ago, Valeria Piano offered a striking new reading of a papyrus discovered in the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum in the 18th century.¹ What was earlier thought of as a possible Senate speech by L. Manlius Torquatus from the Augustan era has since been widely accepted, following her proposal, as a group of fragments from Seneca the Elder's historical work, possibly titled *ab initio bellorum civilium*.² The fact that we now know that this text was read for decades past its author's lifetime, well into the 70s CE, opens tantalizing possibilities about the depth of historical engagements possible for Rome's first-century elites and the texts available to them to do so. As we shall see in the following, descendants of elite writers often maintained texts and access to them,

¹ Piano 2016.

² For the debates concerning the exact span of this work, starting with the Gracchi or with the civil wars between Pompey and Caesar, see the collected volume of Scappaticcio 2020.

and in this paper my focus is on a particular son, Seneca the Younger, and his reflections on his father's and his own life and fame—including posthumously—under Rome's first emperors. Reading the *Moral Epistles*, written in the final, 'retired' years of Seneca's life under the emperor Nero (before his forced suicide in 65 CE), I want to investigate the psychic experience of Roman memory culture during these troubled times of the first century. What happens to a society's representations of its own past when parts of that history are clearly distorted in the hands of dominant politicians?³ And, can anyone challenge an emperor to become the kind of historical figure who anchors and connects past and present in a different way?⁴

I. The silenced past: inherited trauma and the burden of the heir

We have long known that Seneca the Younger was in possession of his father's historical writings from another work with an interesting textual history: his *de vita patris* found hidden in palimpsest, of which only one fragment survives.⁵ In it, Seneca wrote:

Si quaecumque composuit pater meus et edi uoluit, iam in manus populi emissem, ad claritatem nominis sui satis sibi ipse prospexerat. [...] quisquis legisset eius historias ab initio bellorum ciuilium, unde primum ueritas retro abiit, paene usque ad mortis suae diem.

If I had already published for the public all writings that my father composed and intended for publication, he himself would have sufficiently attended to the fame of his own name... Whoever had read his histories from the beginning of the civil wars, from the time when truth first went the wrong way, almost to the day of his death...

The passage suggests an elaborate textual history; a work written by Seneca the Elder that he had intended for a wider audience, but never circulated in his lifetime, which even afterwards was likely only available to a select few, rather than to a broader audience. In identifying this ongoing challenge in his connection to his father, Seneca makes clear both that he has not yet been able to share his father's historical work widely, and that there is something uniquely complicated in publishing at least these historical works.

3 On Roman memory culture, and especially on cultural memory, see the recent edited volume by Dinter and Guérin 2023 that addresses both Republican and Augustan practices.

4 On this issue, see Laura Basu's work on *dispositifs* (or, in English, apparatuses), historical figures who act as social anchors structuring and transmitting the meanings of the past across generations, Basu 2012.

5 *Cod. Vat.* Niebuhr 103sq. = Votterro F97. On this work, see the summary comments of Winterbottom 2014.

What exactly Seneca may have meant by placing a work “*in manus populi*” (‘in the hands of the people’) is far from obvious. Within the period of the Republic, most collections of literary and historical works were private, associated with their owners’ wealth and their aspirations for an educated self-presentation. The idea of more publicly accessible collections first arose, to our knowledge, to Julius Caesar, who planned a large collection of Greek and Roman volumes with public access likely on the example of the library in Alexandria and at least in part to compete with Pompey’s sizeable theater complex in the city of Rome (Suet., *Iul.* 44.2). Caesar died before any of that work could have materialized, and it was C. Asinius Pollio, a former supporter of Antony against Octavian, who opened the first “public” library in Rome in the Atrium Libertatis at some point in the late 30s BCE, and certainly before 28 BCE (Plin., *N.H.* VII 115). This was quite a feat, given that he thereby beat Octavian and the gens Iulia to being first, even though the Augustan family ended up offering two public libraries in the city within the next two decades.⁶ Such buildings, as much other monumental architecture of the era, were clearly political statements: the Pompeian M. Terentius Varro was the only living person who received a portrait in Pollio’s library, while an image of Apollo with the facial features of Augustus decorated the emperor’s library on the Palatine.⁷ After Augustus’ death, Tiberius continued to attend to these libraries, in addition to planning further ones, and these imperial libraries continued to be maintained under the later Julio-Claudians.

It is against this emerging trend of more broadly available writings in settings that tendered special authority to them that we can see, in the final years of Augustus’ reign, Ovid’s fictional visualizations of his own exile poetry books seeking admittance, supposedly in vain, to “public” libraries (*Tr.* III 1 and 14) and thus ultimately making it only to the private collection of Brutus (*Ep. ex Ponto* I 1).⁸ Today we cannot state with absolute certainty what happened to Ovid’s books, and whether falling from the graces of the emperor equalled some kind of formal expulsion from the imperial collections. Certainly limits started to emerge as to what could be publicly circulated, and around 6 CE Augustus enacted a legal ban on publishing defamatory material that did not identify its author (Suet., *Aug.* 55).⁹ It is probably not insignificant that, as a measure of Augustus’ liberality, Suetonius lists, soon after mentioning the above ban, that the emperor did not ban free speech in wills (*testamentorum licentia*, *Aug.* 56)—although whether that suggests their relative importance or almost complete insignificance is unclear.

⁶ Houston – Dix 2016.

⁷ Bowie 2016, 238–240.

⁸ Blum 2017.

⁹ Rudich 2006, 16.

It was also in the final years of Augustus' rule that a much more official and extreme type of limitation on the public circulation of certain works was first enacted. Although modern concepts of censorship may not map neatly onto Roman practices, as Jane McCarthy has shown, a few highly visible instances of punitive bans would have likely urged general caution among the elite.¹⁰ As we learn from the Elder Seneca all books written by Titus Labienus were ordered burned by *senatus consultum* sometime between 6 and 8 CE.¹¹ In recounting the incident, Seneca condemns it, but does not imply that he himself could be personally threatened, which has led scholars to wonder about the actual frequency and the potential threat of such book-burnings for contemporary writers.¹² Although even one book burned is too many, we should note that not appearing markedly afraid is also a possible strategy of self-defense, and that the elder Seneca was certainly playing a long, defensive game. Such behavior made sense: by the time he was writing the final book of his *Controversiae*, likely in the late 30s CE, Caligula had taken the imperial throne and formally restored Labienus' works for public use, along with those of Cassius Severus and Cremutius Cordus, two other senators whose works had been publicly burnt before (Suet., *Cal.* 16.1). It was this *cycle* of book-burning and subsequent restoration, to which I will return below, in addition to a flourishing elite discourse that criticized the burning of books as a tyrant's typical action, that made book-burning a potential threat, but a less likely outcome for works. Even devoid of book-burning, publication of writings explicitly criticizing the emperor remained ill-advised in what can be best described an atmosphere in which even potentially suggestive statements can lead to persecution. Punishment by exile as well as by "voluntary" death or formal execution remained a steady feature of the Julio-Claudian era, making little distinction in finding crimes among genres such as historiography, tragedy or satire.

Practices by which books were supposed to be disappeared complicated demands on descendants, who had traditionally been obligated to try to safeguard works, especially when their preservation and content was potentially condemning and thus dangerous for their own safety. Probably one of the most famous instances representing the difficulties of these situations was that of Aulus Cremutius Cordus, whose historical work celebrating Brutus and Cassius was burned and banned in 25 CE and whose subsequent suicide became an exemplary case regarding the freedom of speech in Tacitus' *Annals*.¹³ We know from the surviving parts of the Elder Seneca's works that Cremutius' speeches

¹⁰ McCarthy 2013, 2–16.

¹¹ Pace Rohmann 2013, I believe that the senate could not have acted without the emperor's express approval or even likely preference, even if some of the conflict may have been based on inter-senatorial conflict.

¹² Howley 2017, 223–225.

¹³ For some of the relevant issues see Wisse 2013.

remained widely known.¹⁴ We learn more about *how* they survived from Seneca the Younger, who references this case in detail in his *Consolation to Marcia*, Cremutius's daughter, written following her son's death around 40 CE.

In his recollection of the famous incident of her father, Seneca praises Marcia for her brave behavior (*Ad Marc.*, I 2):

fudistique lacrimas palam et gemitus devorasti quidem, non tamen hilari fronte texisti; et haec illo saeculo, quo magna pietas erat nihil impie facere.

Ut vero aliquam occasionem mutatio temporum dedit, ingenium patris tui, de quo sump-tum erat supplicium, in usum hominum reduxisti et a vera illum vindicasti morte ac resti-tuisti in publica monumenta libros, quos vir ille fortissimus sanguine suo scripserat.

You shed tears visibly and indeed choked down sobs, nevertheless you have not hidden behind a cheerful face, and so in a century in which it was of great *pietas* to do nothing against *pietas*. But as the change of times offered the opportunity, you returned the genius of your father, for which he suffered the death penalty, to the benefit of men, and you have saved him from true death and you restored the books, which that most brave man had written in blood, to public record.

The passage is as rich in references to filial piety and related obligations, as it is suggestive of the complications for heirs when it came to mourning those who had died resisting imperial pressures. Shedding tears, what counts as *pietas* traditionally speaking, is potentially dangerous, and it is better to put on an act with a cheerful face. Under these circumstances what counts as *pietas* is turned upside down.

What can an heir to a condemned person do? Especially an heir in possession of some more risqué writings? Marcia ultimately perseveres, but only with the change of times (*mutatio temporum*, 1.3): her ability to save her father's work from complete destruction allows her to save him from "true death" (*vera mors*, 1.3), on Seneca's reading. This is the current way to show *pietas* and it works: his memory can thrive now and in the future (*cuius viget vigebitque memoria*, 1.3). But what about the in-between time, after one's father's death but before some freedom of speech, even if still somewhat limited, returns? About a dozen years passed between the time when Cremutius had already killed himself, around 25, and when his works could be openly read.¹⁵

The *Consolatio ad Marciam* was likely written around Seneca's father's death, and these statements thus resonate with Seneca's own situation, in which a surviving descendant holds on to their father's potentially dangerous manuscripts. It is all the more notable that Seneca's own parallel obligation, to publish his father's historical work, appears to have stalled, which meant that for another generation these histories would not reach a wider audience, if any. In

¹⁴ Cf. the references to him in Sen., *Suas.* VI 19, VI 23 (notably, not very positive).

¹⁵ Sen., *Ad Marc.* 1.2.

that contest between father and son, he is not delivering his own traditional obligations.¹⁶ I am especially interested in his experience, in possession of his father's historical work, which he clearly thinks worthy of *claritas* (fame), yet which may still need to remain at best in very limited circulation due to the dangers of angering the ruling emperor or someone in their retinue. Today, in the 21st century, such family legacies with hidden materials and silences are often understood as representing, even if only in a limited sense, a potential case of intergenerational trauma, with its complex biological and psychological sequelae.¹⁷ As part of a larger research project on insecurity in the Roman empire,¹⁸ my recent work has explored the application of notions of 'trauma' to depict the psychic experience of living through this period of Roman history. Although I maintain that it is impossible to diagnose a person from antiquity with a psychological illness defined according to modern diagnostic criteria, yet, we must consider the possibility of traumatic suffering with its own physiological reactions to certain kinds of experiences, given that this has been widely validated in various historical periods.¹⁹ In Seneca's case, the lack of publication confirms continued limitations on the freedom of speech and silencing, both publicly, but also in general, when members of Rome's elite were trying to come to terms with their past and present.

It has been widely observed in studies on trauma that the lack of meaning-making, especially when there is no integration of trauma-related material in one's broader understanding of life, exacerbates the negative outcomes following the traumatic experience.²⁰ Although we have no way of determining the date of *de vita patris* with any certainty and how the particular experiences of the time may have shaped Seneca's work, in writing a biography of his father Seneca certainly offered at least some witness both to his father's excellence and to the iniquitous circumstances which had prevented the publication of his historical work. Even if it is suggestive that Seneca may have chosen to write a biography of his father, which was quite unusual at the time, in search of some belated understanding of these complex circumstances, we will never know for certain. But of the options available to him, we can firmly establish that he passed by the filial obligation to publish his father's work and, instead, opted to create a biographical depiction, likely exploring what the best way of preserving his memory might be.

16 Cf. Gloyne 2017, ch. 4 on what fathers and sons owe each other, especially as presented in Seneca's *De beneficiis*.

17 See El-Khalil et al. 2025 for a recent summary of this research.

18 Uden – Várhelyi forthcoming.

19 Note the careful study of symptoms in Paganin 2026.

20 For example, note the classic, if somewhat problematic summary in Steger – Park 2012.

II. The contested present: doublespeak and imperial exemplarity

In the slim remaining fragment from Seneca's work on his father, a phrase highlights a turning point between the republican freedom of speech and its end, "*unde primum ueritas retro abiit*" (from the time when truth first went the wrong way, Vottero F97). Works on recent history published in the final years of the Republic and the first century of the Roman empire certainly encountered a world in which investigations into truth (*veritas*) were hampered by political limitations on expression. This was especially emphatic when it came to the history of the civil wars; and no matter the exact starting point of the Elder Seneca's historical work (of which there is some debate),²¹ recalling the final years of the republic or those of recent emperors was equally dangerous. But writing a biography was also not without danger, in particular in light of what we may call the new imperial order of history.

In the transformation from Republic to Empire, many literary genres and modes of knowledge themselves underwent change. Historiography changed from being a story about Rome, the city itself from its humble beginning to its imperial extent, to being about Rome as-embodied-in-the-emperor.²² In parallel, exemplary discourse and self-representation evolved partially in response to the heightened interest in biographical and autobiographical writings starting with the late Republic. Once in sole power, the emperor Augustus himself had composed an autobiographical text entitled *de vita sua*,²³ nevertheless it was the *Res Gestae*, intended for widespread publication in the whole Roman world upon the emperor's death, that set the new standard for the widescale representation of socio-cultural power.²⁴ One of the primary ways in which imperial discourse engaged Roman tradition, and the question of what it is to be (a good) Roman, was exactly via the appropriation of the exemplary language that had flourished in Republican Rome.²⁵ The influence in public life was immense: Clifford Ando traced the wide reach of the imperial ideals it presented into the honorary sphere of municipal life around the empire.²⁶ Further, the desire for funerary commemoration among a much wider public, but often in parallel terms of

21 Cf. numerous studies in Scappaticcio 2020.

22 Kraus 2005, 181.

23 Likely apologetic and covering only the period down to 25 BCE.

24 Lowrie 2009, ch. 12.

25 Although this to some extent was a measure of the major decline in Republican forms of exemplarity—given that the emperor was, by definition, always praised—Rebecca Langlands recently contended that it may better be considered a transformation in response to the altered political structures of the time, showing the enduring power of this fundamentally Roman cultural model, cf. Langlands 2018, 252–257.

26 Ando 2013.

praise, fuelled, or at the very least contributed to, the epigraphic habit, especially in the Western empire.²⁷

The models now originating almost exclusively from the imperial house not only shaped most public verbal and visual imagery, but also influenced how one could mark and think about excellence and its representation in one's lifetime and especially beyond. This nevertheless created its own challenges: for example, despite the lived experience of his subjects, Nero continued to control his own adulated public representations, and could still garner popularity among the people and the military. His ongoing power meant that members of the elite were required to speak on command and according to the official version of events, leading to a widespread culture of theatricality and doublespeak.²⁸ As Seneca himself put it in his *On Clemency*, written around 55 or 56, "nobody today would seek a model (*exemplar*) for Nero" outside of himself (I 1.6), implying that Nero was consistently presented as the best possible *exemplum* and was presumed to be above comparison. The culture of competitive flattery emphasizing the primacy of the emperor as the exemplary model²⁹ would have likely enhanced the psychic experience of disconnect: Nero acted as a terrible actual role model while claiming to be an excellent one. It may have also contributed to an interest in discussing what a good example might actually look like, and there was clearly a heightened desire to offer exemplary biographies of other, positive models. Thus it is likely not coincidental that the most definitive biography of Cato the Younger as a hero of resistance to autocratic power was in fact written under Nero, by Seneca's contemporary and fellow Stoic, Thrasea Paetus, along with other, more complicated representations, such as Lucan's.³⁰

Living under a series of exemplarily bad emperors who have nevertheless claimed exceptionally positive exemplarity during the first part of the first century CE led to a key lesson regarding emperors' posthumous memory, namely, the contestable nature of retrospective assessments. Especially for those close to the imperial center, the pattern must have been clear: praise for the living emperor was almost always followed by vilification upon his death in a dynamic of markedly bifurcated and likely exaggerated depictions (Tac., *Ann.* I 1). Seneca's deep familiarity with posthumous whiplash in the assessment of rulers is an example of and is showcased in his *Apocolocyntosis*, written in 54.³¹

27 Originally McMullen 1982 and Woolf 1996, the other key factor generally identified is inheritance law. Note also Beard 1998, 84–114 on the close interrelation of the rich epigraphic evidence with other genres of biographical writing in this period.

28 Cf. Bartsch 1994.

29 For "competitive flattery" see Wallace-Hadrill 2005, 245.

30 On this see, most recently, Rauh 2018.

31 In fact, it is the satirical *Apocolocyntosis* that gives us the best insight into assumed qualifications for becoming a *divus*, as well as to the potential (re-)assessment of the achievements of

But he was no stranger to the critical potential of such an evaluation even prior to 54: soon after the previous change of rulers, in the early years of Claudius' rule, he criticised the prior emperor, Caligula, for his inappropriate behavior towards the heavens (*dementia*, *De ira* 20.8–9), and for his “madness” (*furor*, *De consolatione ad Polybium* 13.1).³² Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* offers one such critical posthumous assessment of Claudius, and the satire capitalises on the entertainment aspect of turning the living emperor's flattery-based positive exemplarity into an exemplary negative, which is especially comical against the sweeping backdrop of large-scale representations of imperial exemplarity.

Further, by the time we reach Neronian Rome, there has been a long enough line of imperial examples to create not only its own framework of references, but also to make clear that the *exempla* of former emperors were always up for further re-assessment. This is practically acted out in Seneca's *On Clemency*, which endorses the *exempla* of former Julio-Claudian rulers to guide the young emperor only selectively. Instead of full-scale endorsement of all preceding emperors, Nero's own family, the new emperor was expressly instructed to follow only the good *exempla* of Augustus but avoid his (and other emperors') negative ones. It must have been apparent to all that the positive depiction of ruling emperors could be quickly changed into negative *exempla* upon their deaths, and no amount of actions while alive or large-scale display of written texts could protect them from such posthumous challenges.

III. The future stage? The *exitus* and a new community

Roman Stoics were famously interested in offering *exempla* for moral education and in behaving in ways to become a future exemplar by acting as role models in the present.³³ But any such attempt at long-term exemplarity also faced the more general difficulties in controlling one's posthumous fame as discussed above. A passage of the *Moral Epistles* well exemplifies Seneca's awareness about these matters. The first letter of Book 2, *Epistle* 13, appears to regard an old philosophical theme, namely that death is not to be feared. But the letter soon turns to the consideration that dying in the right way could in fact add to the glory of one's life. The imaginary interlocutor suggests that “such a death will make my life honorable” (*mors ista vitam honestabit*, 13.14). Seneca agrees, and makes the claim that Socrates was made great by the hem-

the deceased. In Tac., *Ann.* XII 69 Claudius' death and divinisation in that year, strictly following the model of Augustus, is depicted as primarily Agrippina's scheme to gain power for Nero.

32 Whitton 2013, 152. In that instance, Seneca identified the emperor's foolish behavior as an incentive for the conspirators to kill him, and assessed it as justified.

33 Turpin 2008. Cf. also Roller 2018, chapter 8 for a discussion regarding the benefits of living along with exemplary individuals as the best way of learning from them.

lock, and Cato the Younger would have had much less glory without his admirable suicide (*magnam partem detraxeris gloriae*, 13.14). One striking aspect of Seneca's assertion is the shift to the moment of death as the primary, decisive measure of one's life.³⁴ Tom Habinek called attention to the use of *gloria* in these passages, a word which in the empire became limited to *princeps* and military heroes, as well as philosophers, and suggested that this passage in particular is shaped by the zero-sum, highly competitive nature of trying to reach (posthumous) glory.³⁵

It is exactly such a competition that is dramatised in Tacitus' depiction of the final break between Nero and Seneca in his *Annals*: when Seneca asks to retire, the emperor challenges him with the argument that such an action would only earn *gloria* to Seneca, but would lead to the emperor's infamy (*Ann.*, XIV 56.2). Tacitus was of course aware that it was Nero's actions while alive, rather than this particular encounter, that most heavily contributed to his posthumous notoriety; as did the emperor's ultimate suicide, marred by endless agony and hesitation—in apparent contrast with and clearly subpar to the suicides of Socrates or Cato, or many members of the elite who killed themselves during his rule. Tacitus' story highlights that the posthumous contestation was on the mind of individuals already while alive. But in the early 60s, while working on the *Epistles*, Seneca must have wondered how exactly Nero and he himself would die and whether Nero could ever outdo him in this competitive venture. It is also a bet on the future, claiming that ultimately it will be the philosopher and not the emperor who would gain control of the assessment of both lives.

In planning for an honorable death Seneca faced a particular bind. He clearly aspired to a remarkable death, on the examples of Socrates and Cato, which he could certainly arrange for. Like so many others of high rank in Neronian Rome, he could prepare for how he would end up committing suicide: Petronius chose an elaborate performance of extravagance, crowned by sending Nero a list of the emperor's inappropriate liaisons, complete with details of the sexual acts (*Tac., Ann.* XVI 19). Most others balanced a will benefitting the emperor (for the benefit of their surviving family members) with acting bravely in the final moments.³⁶ The ultimate outcome of death was often a given, enforced by the emperor if not completed otherwise, and we can observe, especially in Tacitus, how this problematised the whole enterprise of aspiring philosophers challenging the emperor. Although *exitus* literature dramatised these deaths to great effect, there was something rather dispirited about the endless sequence of suicides by elite men: and Tacitus who describes them in great detail struggles with the question whether these were worthy endeavors or ex-

³⁴ Pierini 2014, 177.

³⁵ Habinek 2000.

³⁶ See Edwards 2002 on the general popularity of acting metaphors in Neronian death scenes.

amples of *patientia servilis* (*Ann.* XVI 16.1), his striking phrase to describe elite subservience in this period.³⁷

Seneca thus wanted not only to enact the philosophical suicide, but to place the posthumous frame of the narrative fully within his own control. Evidence from outside the *Epistles* confirms that Seneca planned to present his final hours in ways that allowed its seamless incorporation into the *exitus* tradition. Tacitus suggests that some of his final words were pronounced “as if publicly” (“*velut in commune*,” *Ann.* XV 63), and some were actually published (“*in vulgus edita*,” *ibid.*). Preparations had been made: he had had poison ready (“*provisum pridem venenum*,” *Ann.* XV 64), and he had pre-made plans for his funeral (*ibid.*). The potential for martyr glory was a given in such moments, and posthumous *gloria* features largely in the Tacitean depictions of Seneca’s fellow senators driven to suicide.³⁸ That Seneca allows his wife to participate in order not to deny her her own *gloria* (*Ann.* XV 63.2) confirms this as the ultimate goal. The appeal of the Socratic example and of the *exitus* literature is evident in Tacitus’ description, in which Seneca himself is focused on posthumous fame: he claims to leave his friends an image of his life (*imago vitae suae*, *Ann.* XV 62).

Thus it makes sense that the *Moral Epistles* themselves, written in Seneca’s final years, show a practical obsession with dying the right way. The very first letter in the collection establishes its main theme, self-monitoring, via the paradoxical statement that “*quidquid aetatis retro est mors tenet*” (death holds whatever is past in our life, *Ep.* 1.2). The point Seneca makes is that considering death a future and singular event is a mistake, and life is better spent preparing for it. Yet in light of the discussion above, we can also recognise another theme concerning the lack of control regarding how one’s past may be recollected by others. In fact, Seneca makes a play at one of the rich intertextual frameworks of these lines: Horace’s *Ode* III 29, in which the poet concludes a long list of Roman exemplary stories by moral exhortation to return to a life of philosophy. He invites Maecenas to his Sabine farm, away from the threatening politics of Rome, by evoking Epicurean wisdom about life and death. In addition to the situational similarities between Horace’s and Seneca’s late-in-life withdrawals from the politicised social scene in Rome, Horace’s focus is on the ideal Epicurean who has the power to claim that no matter the existential uncertainty of the future, “*non tamen irritum, quodcumque retro est, efficient*” (yet [the Father] will not make null what is past [in my life], III 29.45–46).³⁹ The in-

37 For this subtler range of *patientia*, see Kaster 2002, who identifies it as a lesser, more problematic version of *constantia*.

38 Thrasea: Tac., *Ann.* XVI 25–26; note also Petronius’ opposition to seeking *gloria*: *Ann.* XVI 19.2.

39 Nisbet-Rudd connect this section of Horace to Seneca Nisbet, Rudd: 359 (ad loc.); see also Edwards 2017, 73 on the connections between Horace and Seneca’s *Epistles*.

tertextual link to Seneca's argument about the philosopher's control over his own memory, in life or death, is made even more likely by a political connection: this *Ode* likely responds to tensions following a conspiracy against Augustus, that led the poet to become resigned to the insecurity of his future.⁴⁰ Evoking Horace, who during intense political tensions, including the condemnation of senators to death, advises a withdrawal to philosophy, Seneca shifts the emphasis to the poet's Epicurean claim to one's own memory, even in death.

More direct preparations for and reevaluations in light of approaching death run through many of the *Epistles*, and I would argue that the theme is given special emphasis by the placement of relevant letters: it returns in marked positions in the openings of what can be tentatively identified as Book II (*Ep.* 13), Book III (*Ep.* 22) and Book IV (*Ep.* 30), in addition to Book VIII (*Ep.* 70) and Book XVII (*Ep.* 101). Seneca appears to embrace the ideals of *exitus* literature cautiously: for example, the opening letter of Book 4, *Epistle* 30, presents Aufidius Bassus as an idealised figure, yet one who "accepts death, rather than reaches for it" (*admittunt illam, non attrahunt*, 30.15). This is also Aufidius Bassus the historian, who wrote either a monograph on Cicero or discussed him in detail in his historical work; in either case, the elder Seneca noted how Aufidius famously depicted Cicero's final moments as brave (*Suas.* VI 18).⁴¹

This intertextual reference to the elder Seneca's work also calls attention to the contrast between choosing a Cicero or a Cato as an example.⁴² On the one hand, we have a famous orator who is murdered when his political aspirations come to naught; on the other, we have a Roman statesman-philosopher fighting for, and losing, what he sees as the last chance for freedom in Rome. By the time of the Senecas' writing, Cicero's final moments have become subject to intense rhetorical debate, while Cato was seen as an exemplary Stoic hero of resistance.⁴³ In the difference between Cicero the rhetorician and Cato the statesman-philosopher the difference between Seneca the Elder and the Younger is played out again: in *Suasoriae* VI the Elder reviews the best arguments for Cicero to negotiate for survival, in *Epistle* 24 the Younger details the final hours of Cato the Younger's life as a fight for freedom: "*generosum illum contemptoremque omnis potentiae spiritum non emisit sed eiecit*" (he did not release but rather expelled that soul, noble and defiant of all control, 24.8).⁴⁴

Cato's and others' deaths evoke exemplary language, and a particular logic of exemplariness is on display in another letter depicting a death. In *Epistle* 77,

40 On the complex personalities involved see Miller 2009, 8–9, fn. 21, with earlier bibliography.

41 Syme 1964, 418.

42 Cf. Trinacty 2009.

43 Dinter 2020 highlights the importance of Cato the Elder and Cicero as rhetorical examples for Seneca the Elder. Behr 2020, 152–153 points out how much emphasis Seneca's letters place on Cato the Younger as a philosopher and his death.

44 For this critical element on the part of Seneca the Younger, see also van den Berg 2020.

the otherwise unknown Tullius Marcellinus is dying of illness and an unnamed Stoic friend “of ours” is called in to offer his advice. This friend removes the fears of all those present, and Marcellinus goes on to commit suicide in a way that happens to foreshadow Seneca’s own later death. Using double *litotes*, Seneca calls the story a *fabella* neither *ingrata* nor *inutilis*, because Marcellinus’ tale emphasizes that he did not suffer and is thereby pleasing, and it is potentially useful: “for necessity frequently demands such *exempla*” (*Saepe enim talia exempla necessitas exigit*, 77.10). *Fabella* is an odd word to use for an exemplary story, much more likely to depict an animal fable (as in, e.g., Quintilian I 9.2), but it is also used by Seneca to identify a “lighter story” (*leviora studia*), encouraged as a form of relaxation from more serious study.⁴⁵ After all, Marcellinus is not a philosopher, but under the guidance of a philosopher, he may still be able to carry out a proper death, one maybe less political but with reduced suffering.⁴⁶

From a philosophical perspective, Seneca’s larger explanation of a proper death relies on the concept of fate,⁴⁷ and, importantly for my argument, on the fact that in death we are in the company of many. Although this latter may seem like a standard view of Stoic philosophy, in the context of the intergenerational demand to honor one’s ancestors it takes on renewed importance. Alex Dressler suggested that, especially in his *Moral Epistles*, Seneca engages the complex dynamics of exemplarity with a particular goal, so that commendable actions encounter an audience who will in turn reiterate that action in their own context “continuing through time until the community of aspirants and sages becomes one of indefinite admittance and reciprocal relationality”.⁴⁸ While Dressler’s primary emphasis is, rightly, on the inherent (linguistic) instability of such a reception that Seneca calls attention to, I also fully share his sense that the letters aim at creating a community far beyond that offered by their direct addressee, Lucilius. In one letter, Seneca emphatically compares having an image of a friend to the even better option of having a letter from them (*Ep.* 40.1). By creating a community of like-minded individuals, even if only by writing to them and with the hope that they preserve your philosophical example beyond your lifetime, Seneca tries to shape and control his own posthumous assessment. His heirs obligated to carry on his memory are not merely members of his family, but of the whole philosophical community to come.

IV. Conclusion

⁴⁵ Russo 2024, 53.

⁴⁶ Venarucci 2023.

⁴⁷ Setaioli 2013.

⁴⁸ Dressler 2013, 169. Cf. also Seal 2021 on the challenges of reconciling the philosophical community with the social world of first-century Rome.

Seneca spent his final years writing the *Moral Epistles* in a period in which he was well aware of the challenges regarding establishing any truth of history and of one's life, and knowing what representation thereof may last beyond one's life. To what extent the idea of the letters has anything to do with the problems of meaning-making and posthumous evaluation I have discussed above is arguable: the puzzle of this endeavor has been variably interpreted as based on Seneca's own, internal needs or some wider purpose.⁴⁹ Retired political figures, on the model of Cicero, would write philosophical works in the ancient world, as today: but why these letters, so didactic in intention and so clearly presenting an image of Seneca as a philosopher at work on himself? It is worth contrasting, again, the explicitly didactic *On Clemency* with the *Moral Epistles*, written just seven years apart, yet in completely different situations. There, Seneca openly offered *exemplum*-based advice to primarily one, identified addressee: the new emperor Nero. But now, seven years later, Nero had killed his mother and many others, and Seneca must have known that he was likely to follow soon: the philosopher's failure as a teacher or guide to produce a good emperor had become apparent. With this highly visible failure associated with his name, one may wonder about Seneca's choice to offer to educate and guide a different kind of addressee in the *Epistles*, Lucilius.

Was this a new Seneca now?⁵⁰ Catherine Edwards' convincing and influential reading of the *Epistles* as seeking (and teaching) self-transformation via moral philosophy has been augmented and challenged by other scholars.⁵¹ One of the especially alluring arguments for my purposes has been put forward by Yun Lee Too, who suggested that Seneca's primary project in the *Epistles* was in fact literary and artistic: to create a fictional identity for himself as a philosopher—with the ultimate goal of offering an alternative to others so that they can avoid reading his life as primarily the failed teacher of Nero.⁵² While originally Too proposed this point in contradistinction to more internally focused readings, such as Edwards', we may wonder if we need to rely on a more complex understanding beyond a simple inside/outside dynamic.

From the perspective of the trauma framework I have established in the first part of this paper, the experience of being silenced, as Seneca the Elder was regarding his historical work, and as Seneca the Younger was during his exile in the 40s and again in his 'retirement,' from 62 CE on, is especially troubling be-

49 For the internal needs, the best work remains Edwards 1997; the external needs have been variably interpreted as, for example, stage oriented, cf. Too 1994. See also Rudich 1997, 96–101 for questioning the genuineness of Seneca's withdrawal from public life as presented in his letters.

50 Cf. Bartsch 2015, 187–88 for the notion that Seneca presented an alternative self in the *Epistles*, different from his earlier works.

51 Edwards 1997.

52 Too 1994, 216–218.

cause it interferes with the socially mediated process of meaning-making.⁵³ It is noteworthy that the scholarly readings of the *Epistles*, both those internally and those performatively focused, identify Seneca's need to create a new sense of his own life via the letters, and to do so at a point in his life when many of his earlier ambitions may have appeared to have failed. I would add that Seneca is also responding to his own father's life, including the lack of meaning and clarity—even posthumously—regarding right and wrong, truth and untruth. The son's letters are certainly not just about the delivery of philosophical doctrine.⁵⁴ The innovation Seneca is working on is to try to develop a new approach, to try to make meaning and to initiate a letter exchange that will last far into the future, that could make a claim to withstand changing times and changing powers whatever they may be. In many ways, this is a fitting project for Too's artistic writer-director, who "composes and enacts his drama of the state" in competition with Nero,⁵⁵ and to Edwards' moral philosopher now aiming at a much wider audience interested in philosophical self-transformation in the future. But the challenge offered by Seneca to the emperor and to Roman society is not just a matter of artistic competition or of developing the proper approach to self-transformation, but, rather, Seneca's defiance to the raw, power-based version of Rome created by the emperor, which may have had little to do with the experiences of many. Ultimately, the ambition of the *Moral Epistles* can be compared to the Augustan *Res Gestae*, in the sense of shaping their author's posthumous reception both in a direct way and in a way that shapes the public exemplary discourse and its claim to truthfulness well into the future. The process includes setting down the building blocks of a new community, of Seneca's (future) correspondents, the like-minded individuals who will continue, by an extended form of "familial" obligation, to retell and reflect his life as an *exemplum* for themselves.

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⁵³ In a further study, I also aim to address the embodied aspects of this experience, for which now see Devereaux 2024.

⁵⁴ Cf. Graver 2015 on the philosophical flexibility of Seneca in incorporating, for example, Epicurean tenets.

⁵⁵ Too 1994, 217.

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