

Veiled Criticism in
Seneca's *Epistulae Morales*

Tamas Karoly Preston

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Department of Classics, Archaeology and Ancient History

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Abstract

This thesis aims to illuminate Seneca's criticisms of Neronian Rome through a novel exploration of the philosopher's collection of moral letters – the so-called *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*. Noting the glaring absence of court politics in these letters the thesis identifies themes of dissimulation and veiled criticism, penned by Seneca in a concealed manner to ensure his safety during a time of dire political unrest.

The first chapter establishes the cultural context of this collection by examining how they fit in with the practice of elite Roman letter writing. This line of inquiry stems from a longstanding question in the scholarship as to whether the *Epistulae Morales* are letters in the earnest sense, or merely a literary-philosophical exercise contrived by Seneca. The chapter concludes that the letters can be seen as genuine, exchanged with their addressee. They were, however, also written for the wider senatorial class who are clearly the subject of Seneca's moral discussions.

The second chapter examines the circumstances which preceded the writing of these letters in order to identify points of political tension under Nero's reign. Drawing on the Neronian books of Tacitus' *Annals* and earlier Senecan treatises, this chapter identifies themes of political ideology (clemency, *libertas*, tyranny, *superbia*) which shaped the ongoing altercations between senate and emperor during Nero's rule.

With the political tensions identified, the third chapter unearths the underhanded ways in which Seneca criticises Nero's reign throughout the letters. Additionally, this chapter showcases a range of techniques employed by Seneca to disguise his criticisms in order to maintain deniability and avoid persecution.

The fourth and final chapter examines *Letters* 14 and 18 in detail, illustrating the techniques discussed in the preceding chapter and bringing to light Seneca's veiled criticisms of Nero's regime. The pair of case studies demonstrates that Senecan criticisms are present throughout the collection, and are apparent in both letters with overt political themes (eg. *Letter* 14) and those which are, at first glance, seemingly mundane and commonplace (eg. *Letter* 18).

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Signature:

Date:

Tamas Karoly Preston

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Vale,

Tamas

Notes on Abbreviations and Referencing

Abbreviations of ancient works within this thesis follow the conventions set out in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (4th Ed.), except for the *Naturales Quaestiones*, which is abbreviated as *NQ*. Internal cross-references within this thesis are indicated by ‘Chapter’ or ‘Ch.’.

References to Seneca’s *Naturales Quaestiones* follow the conventional book order.¹

References to Cicero’s *Ad Familiares* and *Ad Atticum* follow the ‘vulgate’ numbering of the letters rather than the order in Shackleton Bailey’s editions.

Translations

Except where otherwise stated in the footnote, translations of ancient passages are from the following works:

Cassius Dio = Cary (1914)

Cicero, *Att.* = Shackleton Bailey (1999)

Fam. = Shackleton Bailey (2001)

Demetrios, *Eloc.* = Trapp (2003)

Epictetus, *Discourses* = Hard (2014)

Julius Victor, *Ars Rhetorica* = Trapp (2003)

Livy = Ker (2009)

Quintilian, *Inst.* = Butler (1920)

Seneca, *Apocol.* = Eden (1984)

Clem. = Braund (2009)

De Ira = Davie (2009)

Ep. = Graver & Long (2015)

Naturales Quaestiones = Hine (2010)

Suetonius = Edwards (2000)

Tacitus, *Ann.* = Yardley (2008)

¹ Williams 2014, 182-3; Hine 2010, 1-2.

INTRODUCTION

The fatal order for Lucius Annaeus Seneca's death came from Nero in the April of 65 CE, while the philosopher was dining with his wife, Pompeia Paulina, and two unnamed friends in his villa outside Rome (*Ann.* 15.60). Implicated in the Pisonian conspiracy to replace the emperor, Seneca was forced to take his own life. The order seemingly came as no surprise to the philosopher: relations between Seneca and his former student had long been deteriorating, and the fact that hemlock was available at a moment's notice suggests that he had prepared for such an eventuality (*Ann.* 15.64).

Though it is now becoming an increasingly common cliché in the field of Senecan studies,¹ it is of considerable importance for the purpose of this thesis to start by examining the philosopher's death. Tacitus recounts Seneca's death scene with astounding detail.² Yet there are some details which Tacitus' audience was privy to which are now lost to modern scholars. Firstly, a remark by Tacitus – perhaps echoing the popular account of Seneca's death – asserts that “[Nero] more often had experience of [Seneca's] outspokenness than his servility” (*qui saepius libertatem Senecae quam servitium expertus esset*, *Ann.* 15.61). However, even a cursory survey of our ancient sources does not give us good evidence for Seneca's unrestrained speech (*libertas*) in the way Tacitus' passage suggests. In fact, the repetition of explicit praise for Nero suggests the opposite. This praise is present in earlier Neronian works, such as the *Apocolocyntosis* (4.1) and *De Clementia*, as well as in the later *Naturales Quaestiones* (1.5.6, 6.8.3, 7.17.2, 7.21.3). Tacitus' *Annals* also generally give the impression that in managing the desires of the *princeps*, Seneca and Burrus opted for a strategy of placation and compromise (*Ann.* 13.2).

A second missing detail in Tacitus' narrative concerns a final work dictated by Seneca moments before he perished. This last work – considerable in length (*scriptoribus pleraque tradidit*; 15.63) – is not summarised by Tacitus, as he assumes his audience is already well acquainted with it. As Wilson extrapolates, Tacitus' familiarity with

¹ For example, Ker (2009, 1ff), Braund (2015, 15), Griffin (2008, 24).

² His main source was likely a history penned by Fabius Rusticus, a close friend of Seneca's (*Ann.* 13.20). The first chapter of Ker (2009, 17-39) is a lucid and detailed exploration of Tacitus' sources and Seneca's death scene in ancient texts.

and inclusion of this work suggest that it was likely political in nature, and Seneca's decision to compose it in his final moments might suggest that it was inimical to Nero's regime.³ Tacitus' omission is a great frustration for Neronian scholars wishing to ascertain Seneca's true judgement of his wayward former student.

These peculiarities in Tacitus' death narrative influence the overarching questions this thesis attempts to answer: where in the Senecan corpus might scholars find evidence of Seneca's outspokenness? Since this outspokenness or frank speech (*libertas*) by its very nature challenges the status quo, what does Seneca criticise in Neronian Rome, and how is this criticism conveyed?

In answering these queries, this thesis looks to the *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, Seneca's collection of philosophical letters addressed to Lucilius Iunior, the equestrian procurator of Sicily.⁴ Written after Seneca's initial withdrawal from politics in 62 CE (*Ann.* 14.52-6), the *Epistulae Morales* contemplate a range of ethical matters while promoting a lifestyle of philosophical retirement and leisure (*otium*). The letters are ostensibly apolitical, without a single mention of the emperor or any contemporary events in the Roman political sphere in 124 extant letters.⁵ And yet many scholars have been eager to see vague references to Seneca's political career in the collection, as will be discussed in due course.

What is the proper way to approach the history of Seneca? Seneca remains to this day a complex figure in Roman history. Rimell has described the career of the part-time politician, part-time philosopher, part-time playwright as a "miracle of timing", spanning across all five of the Julio-Claudian emperors.⁶ The story of Seneca is intrinsically linked to this dynasty; recalled from exile in 49 CE by Agrippina the Younger, Seneca became tutor to the future emperor Nero (*Ann.* 12.8). It was due to this proximity to the emperor that Seneca became an influential player in Roman politics. Within this story, scholars have carved out their own understanding of Seneca, whether that is of the philosopher-politician, the politician-philosopher, the provincial *novus homo*, or the hypocritical, artistic courtier in Nero's circle.⁷ These varied

³ Wilson 2015, 138-9. This is reinforced by the fact that Tacitus compares them with the last words of Subrius Flavius (*Ann.* 15.67) which were certainly hostile to the emperor.

⁴ On his origins and career, see Griffin 1992, 91.

⁵ Wilson 2015, 139; Edwards 2017, 166.

⁶ Rimell 2015, 122.

⁷ Braund 2015, 26.

approaches are a testament to the complexity of this character. For my part, I have approached this thesis with certain precepts common to the school of intellectual history. Though I often refer to Seneca as a ‘philosopher’ throughout the thesis, these characterising labels of historical figures are pointless at best and reductive at worst.⁸ This thesis views Seneca as an intellectual agent of his time who wielded both political influence and cultural capital. To this end, the thesis engages with the *Epistulae Morales* through analysis that is mindful of the political and cultural context of their production.⁹ In reconstructing this context, several historical sources are examined, in addition to the ‘metatextual’ features of the letters – considerations that exist outside of and surrounding the text. Through this holistic approach to the *Epistulae Morales* and the age of Nero, the hidden criticisms within the work are revealed.

More generally, this thesis invites reflection on the relationship between “frank speech” and “veiled speech”.¹⁰ In basic terms, frank speech refers to one’s ability to ‘speak one’s mind’, while veiled speech describes the methods by which someone shares their true thoughts when frank speech becomes an impossibility. Both forms of expression relate to free speech, a ubiquitous ideal valued and prized throughout human history as shown by Baltussen and Davis’ collection of papers that deal with the topic “from Aristophanes to Hobbes”.¹¹ Through limitations on free speech, usually reinforced through authority and hard power, individuals resort to creative and covert methods of veiled speech to express opinions; this veiled speech often requires rigorous analysis and decoding to understand its true meaning.¹² As Ahl argues, veiled speech in the ancient world not only required a degree of literary mastery on behalf of the writer or orator but was also regarded as a more effective and dangerous form of communication due to its hidden nature.¹³ While we might generally think those who speak against power and authority do so in an open and outspoken manner (frank speech), this thesis shows that dissidence in Neronian Rome was more often written ‘between the lines’. This is in line with Rudich’s understanding of Neronian dissidence; Rudich likens the situation to that of “repressive regimes” in 20th century

⁸ See Rorty 1989, 70.

⁹ Cuttica 2015, 259.

¹⁰ The terms here are borrowed from Baltussen & Davis (2015, 1-2).

¹¹ Baltussen & Davis 2015, 1-2.

¹² Baltussen & Davis 2015, 4.

¹³ Ahl 1984, 174-5.

Europe, where nonconformist idealists were more often ‘silent’ than outspoken.¹⁴ In short, veiled speech is the method of communication for those who cannot speak openly for fear of repercussions.

With the objectives and framework of this thesis clarified, I now move to a review of the existing scholarship on the topic. This thesis draws on two separate streams of scholarship, one concerning the epistolary practices of the Romans, and the other regarding the political career and literary output of Seneca. In my research, I was especially interested in works that detect dissidence or political criticism in Seneca’s prose works and letters.

Beginning with the topic of ancient letters more broadly, Trapp’s (2003) anthology of ancient letters tackles the fundamental question of what constitutes a letter. Trapp begins with basic considerations regarding the format and function of a letter before extending his discussion to considerations such as a letter’s readership and its “closeness to actuality” – whether the letter is ‘real’ or ‘fictionalised’.¹⁵ Such considerations prove useful for a work such as the *Epistulae Morales*, the epistolary nature of which has been questioned in the past.¹⁶ Building on Trapp’s work, Gibson and Morrison (2007) demonstrate how fluid the epistolary genre might be by pushing the limits of what we might consider to be a letter. What Gibson and Morrison seem to accentuate in their study is that a letter has specific addressee(s) in mind. The recipient(s) of the letter plays an important role in this genre – they are a catalyst through which the writer is able to communicate ideas.¹⁷ The insightful considerations of these two studies serve as a basis from which I launch my exploration of the epistolary features of the *Epistulae Morales*.

While the previous works focused on ancient letters more broadly, I now turn my attention to scholarship focusing on the *Epistulae Morales*. Wilson’s (1987) reevaluation remains an important turning point when it comes to appreciating the epistolary qualities of these letters. While Wilson recognises that Seneca’s letters differ from ordinary ones in the way they eschew small talk and discussion of contemporary social and political activity, the importance of reading the philosophical content is well argued. Two main developments emerge from this essay: first, Seneca’s letters should

¹⁴ Rudich 1997, ix-x.

¹⁵ Trapp 2003, 1-3.

¹⁶ Explored fully in Ch. 1.

¹⁷ Gibson & Morrison 2007, 10-1.

be viewed as ‘progressing’ – ideas are discussed, revisited, and examined from multiple angles.¹⁸ Second, as is demonstrated in *Ep.* 46, Seneca is an active writer whose thoughts are shaped by his mood and situation.¹⁹ This “temporal dynamism”, as Schafer calls it, is best appreciated when the epistolary form of this collection is recognised.²⁰

Regarding the social role of letters, Wilcox’s *The Gift of Correspondence in Classical Rome* (2012) investigates the role of letters in extending, negotiating and continuing friendships within elite Roman circles. Wilcox pays special attention to cultural understandings about the privacy – or lack thereof – of Roman letters, observing how conventions of privacy are regularly broken or subverted.²¹ Wilcox’s study provides a nuanced understanding of the way letters were shared amongst elite Romans, showing how this method of communication was more public than one might expect.

Building on ideas that appreciate the epistolary nature of Seneca’s letters, a chapter by Edwards (2015) – ‘Absent Presence in Seneca’s *Epistles*’ – examines Seneca’s philosophical project with special attention for how the epistolary mode is delivered. In demonstrating the ways Seneca’s philosophical instruction overlaps with ideas of friendship expressed through epistolary form, Edwards explains how the moral lessons conveyed in these letters were intended for a wider readership beyond just the author and addressee.²²

Such developments in our understanding of the letters’ epistolary features influence this thesis through considerations regarding the circulation of these letters and expectations of their privacy.

I now turn to a review of scholarship concerning Seneca’s political career and the political landscape of Neronian Rome. Brunt’s (1975) pioneering article highlighted the role of Stoic philosopher-politicians in the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties through an examination of what Stoic texts teach us about the school’s theories of what makes an ideal ruler.²³ The article also highlights the ways in which an adherence to Stoic doctrine would compel philosophers to oppose tyrants; these Stoic precepts often

¹⁸ Wilson 1987, 118-9.

¹⁹ Wilson 1987, 104-7.

²⁰ Schafer 2011, 35 n. 15.

²¹ Wilcox 2012, 7-9.

²² Edwards 2015, 42 & 52.

²³ See especially Brunt 1975, 9, 18, 23 & 32.

coincided with Roman *mores*.²⁴ While Brunt's comprehensive article covers a number of emperors, my study has a narrower scope, focusing on the reign of Nero from his coronation (54 CE) to the death of Seneca (65 CE). A recent follow-up to Brunt's article can be found in Bartsch's (2017) chapter 'Philosophers and the State under Nero'. Bartsch notices that Seneca and other philosopher-politicians took varied approaches in addressing the emperor's increasingly tyrannical behaviour. With regards to Seneca, Bartsch pictures the philosopher as someone who manipulated Stoic teachings to ingratiate himself with Nero – an ultimately fruitless endeavour.²⁵ Straying from Bartsch's approach, this thesis affords a greater degree of agency to Seneca, viewing him as a figure who wielded a significant degree of influence through much of Nero's reign and tried to shape the emperor into a milder ruler.

On the topic of the politician Seneca, no discussion would be complete without mention of Griffin's (1992)²⁶ seminal study, *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics*. This influential book reconstructs Seneca's political career through an intertextual approach that synthesises details from many ancient sources. Griffin's prosopography remains well reasoned and an authorial entry in the scholarship. Nonetheless, this thesis challenges Griffin's reading of the *Epistulae Morales*, which she views as "dialogues with an epistolary veneer".²⁷

Two works that illuminate the role of theatricality in Nero's reign have influenced my approach to the topic in this thesis. Champlin's (2003) concisely titled monograph '*Nero*' considers the young emperor's interest in theatre as a political tool. Through this perspective of Nero's artistry, Champlin argues that Nero's public image is a carefully constructed piece of propaganda that resonated with an ancient crowd in a more receptive way than historical sources suggest. The aspects of Nero's public persona that Champlin connects with Apollo and the Saturnalia enhance the discussion of these topics when they occur in the *Epistulae Morales*.²⁸ In a similar manner, a recent chapter by Osgood (2017) argues that spectacle under Nero should be viewed as an extension of politics through which the emperor could exert control over the senate through social means.²⁹ These approaches bring to light a new angle on the

²⁴ Brunt 1975, 27-8.

²⁵ Bartsch 2017, 156-8.

²⁶ First published in 1976.

²⁷ Griffin 1992, 419.

²⁸ Champlin 2003, chapters 5 and 6.

²⁹ Discussed in Chapter 2.3

emperor's theatrical tendencies, one that affords a certain amount of calculated genius to these public festivities.

Finally, I turn to a few scholarly works that have detected some hidden criticism within the *Epistulae Morales*. Scholars seem to detect these criticisms in the way Seneca's moral messages relate to the political tensions he experienced in Nero's court, as Rudich does in his enlightening study on *dissimulatio* in this era.³⁰ Both Henderson (2004) and Ker (2009) notice allusions in Seneca's Campanian letters to the murder of Agrippina, noting that the recentness of the event ensured it would not have been forgotten by elite Romans.³¹ While Henderson's challenging examination of the *villae* described in the letters skilfully observes scattered references to Nero, the failure to properly contextualise these allusions weakens our understanding of the hidden criticisms. On this front, Ker does an excellent job in contextualising the Campanian letters, though hidden criticism is not the primary interest of that study. This thesis will look at a larger selection of letters that may contain hidden criticisms, building on these earlier findings.

The last two scholarly works I discuss here share several elements with my own approach to the letters. Wilson's (2015) chapter on "outspoken silence" in the *Epistulae Morales* effectively contextualises the letters as a product of Seneca's displacement from Nero's court and graces. Wilson makes much of the apolitical nature of the letters, finding it a remarkable omission considering the tumultuous situation Seneca withdrew from in 62 CE. The chapter establishes that political silence was an act of dissidence in itself, one that might be liable to charges of *maiestas*; to safeguard himself from these charges, Seneca adopts ideas from Epicurean philosophy that justify his withdrawal and silence.³² While Wilson's chapter examines the way philosophy is used to distance Seneca from the political arena, my thesis differs from this approach by seeing the moralising done in the letters as commentary on various immoral aspects of Nero's reign. In a 2017 chapter, Edwards also observes that the absence of politics in the *Epistulae Morales* is a glaring omission to be taken seriously.³³ For Edwards, Nero's "shadowy presence" can intermittently be detected

³⁰ Rudich 1997, 98-9.

³¹ Henderson 2004, 158; Ker 2009, 344.

³² Wilson 2015, 143-5. The article by Davies (2015) also builds on the ideas of *dissimulatio* in political withdrawal effectively.

³³ Edwards 2017, 166. A forthcoming work by Edwards (2021) also concerns Seneca's dissident ideas in the letters.

throughout the letters when Seneca discusses topics pertaining to politics, such as the relationship between rulers and philosophers (eg. *Ep.* 14, 47 & 73).³⁴ Edwards argues that Seneca's moralising stance puts him at odds with the "illusory gleam of worldly achievement", providing the philosopher with an alternative ideal to aspire to. As a literary work, the letters are also viewed as a form of competition with Nero, the patron of literary arts.³⁵ While I agree that the *Epistulae Morales* do position themselves against Nero, this thesis focuses on the ways Seneca's ethical discussions serve to undermine the status quo of Neronian Rome.

In this review of the literature surrounding the *Epistulae Morales* and their relevance to the political context of Neronian Rome, some general points emerge: while scholars have speculated, sometimes in passing, about various allusions Seneca makes to Nero and his court throughout the *Epistulae Morales*, no dedicated study yet exists to examine them all together. This thesis seeks to fill this gap in the scholarship. Furthermore, some studies centred around the *Epistulae Morales* fail to consider metatextual factors that enhance our understanding of the letters, including how they were exchanged and who read them. Finally, as many of the works discussed have suggested, it is essential to read the *Epistulae Morales* as a product of the fraught political conditions in which they were written.

With these considerations in mind, it will be useful to set out the order of exposition of this thesis. Chapter 1 examines the cultural practice of Roman letter writing to determine how the *Epistulae Morales* fit into this tradition. Here, I defend the view that Seneca's letters can be regarded as genuine correspondence. I also incorporate several metatextual factors to support this view. The chapter concludes by drawing inferences as to what sort of audience would have had access to these letters.

Chapter 2 aims to contextualise the letters by re-examining the political circumstances that preceded Seneca's withdrawal from politics. This re-examination focuses on various ideas and concepts that encapsulate the political tensions of this era, including vices linked to tyranny (*ira*, *crudelitas*) and the use of *clementia* in political discourse. This chapter also studies the narratives of various turning points in Nero's reign, laying the groundwork for many topics that Seneca revisits in the letters, such as the murder of Britannicus and Agrippina and the theatricality of Neronian Rome. In this

³⁴ Edwards, 2017, 166-7.

³⁵ Edwards 2017, 175-6.

investigation, I pay special attention to those major political events that Seneca was close to, owing to his post as advisor to Nero.

Chapter 3 analyses a selection of letters in great depth to determine how Seneca conducts his veiled criticism. In this chapter, I explain how Seneca uses techniques of allusion, omission and contrast in his writing to broach topics that besmirch Nero's rule. This chapter also links these letters to contentious events during Nero's rule and shows how the letters invite elite Romans to reflect on the *mores* of their time.

Chapter 4 engages in a close reading of the letters much like Chapter 3, though with a narrower scope. It focuses on *Ep.* 14 and 18, showing how these two early letters establish Seneca's outlook on Neronian Rome. In this investigation, I observe how Seneca chastises the festivities of Nero and critiques the way contemporary politicians risk danger to themselves by outspoken enmity towards the *princeps*. Ultimately, this thesis argues that veiled criticism of Nero and his circle is widespread throughout the *Epistulae Morales*.

CHAPTER 1

The Genuineness of the *Epistulae Morales*

1.1 The Nature of the *Epistulae Morales*

According to Setaioli, “the first problem the student of the *Epistulae [Morales]* must address is whether the collection reflects a real correspondence between Seneca and Lucilius or whether the epistolary form is just a literary fiction”.¹ The genuineness of the *Epistulae Morales* is complex problem, widely debated among scholars. When scholars query the ‘genuineness’ of these letters, they broadly question the degree to which Seneca is ‘honest’ in the first-hand accounts found within the letters, or whether the letters were even exchanged with Lucilius at all.² Conversely, it may be profitable to consider the question in terms of degrees of fictionality as Wilson does when he questions the extent to which features of the letters are fictionalised.³ Currently, it is more common for scholars to view the letters as a fictional or literary work, with some going so far as to claim that this approach is “no longer controversial”.⁴ As Setaioli rightly states, without conclusive evidence either way, the burden of proof remains with the camp that views the exchange as fictitious.⁵ For this reason, this chapter focuses on examining views put forth by those who argue that these are not genuine letters. By refuting these arguments, the feasibility of seeing these letters as genuine to a certain degree becomes evident.

The recurrent scholarly debate on this problem is essential to this thesis and warrants re-examination. The genuineness of this work can provide an indication as to the audience Seneca had in mind; if these are genuine letters, then Seneca’s intended audience consisted of his contemporaries, chief among them Lucilius. However, if Seneca was merely writing under the guise of the epistolary genre, this might imply a more complex readership – some letters might be seen as addressed to himself, or to

¹ Setaioli 2014, 193. The sentiment is shared by Graver 1996, 11-2.

² Schafer 2011, 34.

³ “It is unprofitable to think in terms of a sharp distinction between a) ‘genuine’ and b) ‘fictional’ correspondence. There are, in this context, degrees of ‘genuineness’”. Wilson 1987, 119 n. 3.

⁴ Wilcox 2012, 176n15. For a more balanced approach, see Setaioli 2014, 193 and n.19.

⁵ Setaioli 2014, 193.

future readers. While Seneca claims to be writing for posterity at *Ep.* 8.2, the truth of this statement – as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis – is far more complex. For now, it will suffice to say that letters imply an immediate audience. Also important to note here is that this is not a strict dichotomy – a piece of prose can be written for several audiences.

This chapter seeks to analyse and refute the main arguments put forth in favour of viewing the correspondence as literary fiction. Griffin’s seminal study – *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* – remains a longstanding and authoritative influence on the debate.⁶ Griffin concludes in favour of viewing the correspondence as fictitious, citing factors which she claims disqualify them from being seen as genuine correspondence. In this chapter, I focus on the arguments which Griffin considers most “weighty”, as it is my view that these inconsistencies can be quite comfortably explained in a manner that supports seeing the *Epistles* as genuine letters. A further objective of this chapter is to provide an answer to the following query: why did Seneca, following a longstanding career writing treatises and tragedies, choose to compose one of his most significant works in epistolary form?⁷

I should clarify that my objective is not to argue entirely in favour of seeing Seneca’s letters as ‘real’ letters. The debate is more nuanced, containing more intermediary stances rather than being about two extremes (real correspondence or literary fiction). As Graver rightly highlights, the arguments brought forth in favour of a fictive correspondence are “extremely various and often surprisingly weak”.⁸ It is somewhat challenging to plot these various stances, given that scholars in the same camps will disagree on some of the finer details. Nonetheless, the various positions can be sketched in broad outline.

On this spectrum, the most extreme arguments in favour of the fictional correspondence are those which argue that both the exchange and the recipient, Lucilius, are Senecan inventions.⁹ This proves to be a difficult position to defend. It is true that the only sources that attest to the existence of a Lucilius are Seneca’s works addressed to him: these letters, the *Naturales Quaestiones* (3.praef 1), and *De*

⁶ Griffin 1992, 351-3 & 416-419.

⁷ The question is posed by Inwood (2007, 135), a study that examines Seneca’s philosophical pedagogy through his decision to impart moral lessons in epistolary form.

⁸ Graver 1996, 12. It should be noted that Graver concludes mostly in favour of a fictitious reading.

⁹ Gowers 2011.

Providentia (1). However, as Graver rightly remarks, it would be unprecedented for Seneca to have dedicated a book to a non-existent friend.¹⁰

Next in this brief overview is what I consider to be the most common position: Lucilius was a real friend of Seneca, but the letters do not constitute genuine correspondence between the pair. Furthermore, this camp views the epistolary veneer of Seneca's work as a mask for something that is essentially akin to a dialogue, treatise or essay.¹¹

The position which I will defend in this chapter notes one important distinction which prevents the letters from being seen as genuine correspondence. Like Edwards,¹² I believe that Lucilius was a real friend and correspondent of Seneca. However, I argue that Seneca's letters deviate from Roman epistolary tradition in one major way: they are written *ad Lucilium* (to Lucilius), but not *for* Lucilius, the distinction being that the content of the letters is not exclusively for the benefit of Lucilius. Instead, Seneca had a broader readership in mind while composing this work.¹³

The first part of this chapter will briefly review the basic tenets of ancient epistolary theory to establish the expectations of an ancient letter. Following this, I re-examine the arguments Griffin offers against the genuineness of this correspondence. By highlighting the epistolary qualities of the letters, I argue the case for seeing the letters as more genuine than previously thought. The final part of this chapter will explore why Seneca chose to write in epistolary form by linking this decision with his intended readership.

1.2 Classifying the Epistolary Genre

The task of defining and categorising what counts as a letter, and what the epistolary genre presupposes, has proven to be a sizeable challenge in the scholarship on ancient

¹⁰ Graver 1996, 25. Note, however, as Graver does, that we should expect some embellishment of the Lucilius described in Seneca's works, though I would not go as far as to claim they are two distinct entities. Furthermore, it may be too much of a coincidence for some that the names of Seneca's addressees are rather appropriate for the subject being discussed.

¹¹ This camp includes Griffin (1992, 418-9), and Graver (1996). Wilson (1987, 2001, 2015), Wilcox (2002, 276n6), Inwood (2007), and Schafer (2011) have supported viewing the correspondence as fictive but have argued for the importance of the epistolary form in which Seneca writes.

¹² See especially Edwards 2005, 277-9 & 2015.

¹³ A view which Graver (1996, 24ff, esp. 28-9) also supports.

letters.¹⁴ Regarding the *Epistulae Morales*, the task is made even more important as past readers have been adamant in categorising the work as ‘essayistic’.¹⁵ This rebranding of the letters detracts from their epistolary qualities by viewing said qualities as an artificial device. As Inwood comments, “It should never have been necessary to argue for something so obvious as the epistolary quality of Seneca’s letters”.¹⁶ Nevertheless, an examination of these epistolary features is helpful for this investigation, as it informs us of the expectations and norms of a Roman letter.

In working towards a categorical definition, Trapp observes six typical characteristics shared between ancient letters:¹⁷

- 1) The letter is authored by one person and addressed to one or more people
- 2) The letter is conveyed through a tangible medium
- 3) The physical letter has to be delivered from the author to the addressee
- 4) The message begins and ends with a conventional greeting or farewell
- 5) The two parties involved in the exchange are separated by distance, and unable to communicate in an unmediated manner
- 6) The letter is expected to be limited in terms of length.

In addition to these six characteristics, and as a natural extension to them, I would add that the ongoing exchange of correspondence is a characteristic that is unique to the epistolary genre. As Wilson rightly emphasises, any single Senecan epistle demands to be read as an entry in a series of letters sent back and forth over several years.¹⁸ When read sequentially, the collection shows that time has passed, and that progress – moral and intellectual¹⁹ – has been made. In other words, ideas represented in letters are not static, but changeable. Throughout the letters, Seneca utilises the opportunity to revisit ideas with a renewed perspective or in greater depth.

¹⁴ Gibson & Morrison (2007) and Edwards (2005) highlight several issues. The former work towards a classification of a letter according to the processes involved in its production and exchange, while the latter focuses on the textual features of the genre. Gibson & Morrison also demonstrate the flexibility of what we might consider to be a ‘letter’ by applying Trapp’s (2003, 1) criteria on Cicero’s *De Officiis*, as well as various Greek verse epistles.

¹⁵ The history of essayistic interpretations is well summarised by Wilson (2001, 164-6).

¹⁶ Inwood 2007, n. 2.

¹⁷ Trapp 2003, 1. Gibson & Morrison (2007, 2) expands on turning Trapp’s characteristics into a list of criteria.

¹⁸ Wilson 2001, 184-5. This is true even if viewing the letters as a fictive device.

¹⁹ Wilson 2001, 185.

First, let us examine the text's characteristics in light of the six points established by Trapp. From just a cursory glance, it is apparent that the collection satisfies a number of these criteria. Many letters are fashioned as a reply to a preceding request from Lucilius, and all begin with a standard greeting and end with the stock farewell 'vale' (criteria 1 & 4). Regarding the length of the letters (6), it has been duly noted that they get longer as the correspondence goes on, and as more philosophically complex topics are broached.²⁰ The longest letters – for example, *Ep.* 90, 94 and 95 – are markedly longer than Seneca's *De Providentia*, the philosopher's shortest treatise. Seneca, in one instance, shows that he is mindful of the length of his letters when he concludes *Ep.* 45 by writing that he does not wish his letters to be longer than expected; at times, Seneca clearly fails to adhere to this 'rule'. This does not in itself detract from the work's epistolary quality. Numerous letters throughout the collection are of a 'suitable' length; that some are exceptional in length does not invalidate this fact. The letters clearly possess those of Trapp's epistolary markers which can be observed within the text (1, 4 & 6).²¹

Another way to test the epistolary nature of the work is to examine the ways in which the *Epistulae Morales* adhere to the tenets of ancient epistolary theory. The principles found in Demetrius' *De Elocutione* and Julius Victor's *Ars Rhetorica* are often invoked as containing authoritative rules for ancient letter writing.²² Demetrius describes the form of a letter with reference to its relation to a conversation: the letter represents one half of a conversation, albeit somewhat more formal and composed when compared to impromptu speech (*Eloc.* 223-4). He continues by emphasising the degree of friendship and honesty expected in a letter, describing the epistle as an "image of [one's own] soul" (*Eloc.* 227, 229, 232). In explaining what the letter should not be, Demetrius urges one to avoid overly complex topics (*Eloc.* 230-1) and to make sure it is limited in both length and style (*Eloc.* 228). Briefly put, Demetrius claims that the letter needs to combine elements of both elegant and plain styles (*Eloc.* 235). Julius Victor repeats a number of the sentiments found in *De Elocutione*; he, too, agrees that a private letter – distinct from an official letter – ought to display brevity as a general

²⁰ Griffin 1996, 419; Edwards 2015, 42-3.

²¹ The metatextual criteria (2, 3 & 5) are dealt with in Ch. 1.3.

²² As a recent example, Edwards 2015, 47. It is unknown whether Seneca was familiar with the works of Demetrius; the exact date of this treatise is unknown (Trapp 2003, 43 & 317). Julius Victor (fourth century CE; Trapp 2003, 321) does not cite Seneca's letters, though he was familiar with the correspondence of Caesar, Augustus, and especially, Cicero (*Ars Rhetorica*, 27).

rule. While Demetrius recommends using proverbs as an accessible form of philosophy in one's letter (*Eloc.* 232), the *Ars Rhetorica* approves the use of proverbs, common history, and poetry to illustrate one's point.

These epistolary techniques are abundantly present in the *Epistulae Morales*, where Seneca signs off the early letters with Epicurean proverbs (*Ep.* 1-29), references individuals from Roman republican history, and repeatedly quotes recognisable Latin poets such as Vergil, Horace, or Ovid. Finally, Julius Victor concludes that private letters differ stylistically from official ones in the way they allow for less serious language (avoids *severitas*): "It is elegant sometimes to address your correspondent as if he were physically present, as in 'hey, you!' and 'what's that you say?' and 'I see you scoff'" (*Ars Rhetorica* 27). The style of writing described here seems to resemble something more akin to a conversation, which is also how Seneca intends his letters to be. In the opening of *Ep.* 75, for example, Seneca responds to a complaint by Lucilius on the casual nature of the philosopher's recent letters:

You complain that I am expending less care on the letters I send you. So I am, for who expends care over a conversation? Only one who deliberately adopts an affected manner of speaking. I wish my letters to be like what my conversation (*sermo*) would be if you and I were sitting or walking together: easy and unstudied (*illaboratus et facilis*).

Seneca here exhibits an acute awareness of epistolary convention. Lucilius is addressed as if he were physically present, and Seneca, at the very least, claims to write in the same manner as if he were casually speaking in a conversation.²³

At this stage, it is apparent that there are clear, observable epistolary markers in the text. Worth noting also is that our sole extant commentary, Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae* referred to the collection as letters (*Epistularum Moralium quas ad Lucilium composuit*; 12.2). Apart from the length of some letters – an admittedly inconsistent variable²⁴ – the *Epistulae Morales* are by technical standards 'letters'. Of course, only

²³ More recently, Schröder (2018, 85) has drawn the reader's attention to the limits of ancient epistolary theory, claiming that the comparison between epistolary correspondence and conversation should not be overstated. Epistolary exchange is a complex genre, and Schröder argues that the ways in which a letter differs from conversation are just as numerous and important as the ways in which they are similar. The point is aptly made in the article, in which Schröder argues that factors outside of the text must be considered in ancient epistolary studies. This view is in line with my argument in section 1.3 of this chapter.

²⁴ I return to the subject of letter length in section 1.4 of this chapter.

the textual elements have been considered so far, since these are the most susceptible to fictionalisation. Further examination of the physical and metatextual criteria are required.

So far, the textual criteria that have been examined are the fundamental features that mark a letter. For a skilled author, these are easy to counterfeit or replicate. Trapp's metatextual criteria, the letter's tangibility (criteria 2), its mode of transportation (3), and the separation of author and addressee (5) are a more accurate measure of whether the epistolary correspondence is genuine. This line of reasoning follows the model that Griffin understands 'real' correspondence necessitates: the letter's physical delivery and ongoing, alternating correspondence between the two parties involved.²⁵ That is, Seneca would send Lucilius a letter, Lucilius would reply, then Seneca would reply, and so on. As modern readers, we face certain difficulties when attempting to make empirical observations about this exchange; some degree of guesswork is required in reconstructing these tangible elements, given the lack of ancient sources and archaeological evidence on the subject.

As Griffin pointedly states, "many features of the Letters commonly cited in support of their genuineness can equally well be taken as signs of skilful simulation".²⁶ While I agree with Griffin's reasoning, this overly cautious approach can hinder the progress of scholarly dialogue on the topic. In what follows, I analyse the metatextual factors that provide further insight into the correspondence's genuineness.

1.3 Chronology of the *Epistulae Morales* and their Exchange

If these are genuine letters sent to and fro in some capacity, as outlined above, it should be possible to reconstruct the various details of this exchange including the chronology of the correspondence and the method of delivery. In this section, I make use of the meagre clues within the text to reconstruct a method of exchange Seneca and Lucilius may have used. To supplement this evidence, I incorporate recent studies which have focused on the exchange of Cicero's letters. If a viable model for the exchange of the *Epistulae Morales* can be reconstructed, this evidence would shift the argument towards seeing the collection as genuine.

²⁵ Griffin 1992, 418. This essentially describes the seventh additional criterion I added to Trapp's list.

²⁶ Griffin 1992, 416.

Seneca composed his *Epistulae Morales* over the span of approximately two years.²⁷ In addition to the 124 extant letters, we must account not only for the two missing books mentioned by Aulus Gellius (*NA* 12.2)²⁸ but also for the possibility that not every letter was published.²⁹ During the peaks of correspondence, from letters 91 to 122, thirty-two letters are allegedly sent by Seneca over the course of about two months.³⁰

As Fantham recently estimated,³¹ the correspondence expects the reader to believe that a letter was penned by Seneca every six or seven days. Furthermore, each letter implies a counterpart penned by Lucilius. Admittedly this was not always the case, as Seneca acknowledges in *Ep.* 118.1 that he writes that letter before receiving a reply. However, the fact that Seneca acknowledges this practice implies that it was an exception to the rule, and most of the letters in the collection purport to be in reply to an issue raised by Lucilius.³²

Whatever the case may be, Fantham's estimation, which is based on an average, is somewhat misleading, if we take into consideration that the exchange would have been irregular, not on a set schedule. Furthermore, delivery of the letters was also often unpredictable; as stated above, certain periods saw a higher volume of exchange. Furthermore, in the case of *Ep.* 50.1, Seneca writes that the letter he is replying to was received "many months (*multos menses*) after [Lucilius] sent it".

Given that references within the *Epistulae Morales* to the exchange of letters are sparse, the process by which the letters were exchanged is often overlooked. Another factor often not accounted for is the fact that most of the letters would have to traverse the sea before reaching their destination in Sicily. In *Ep.* 71.1 Seneca draws attention

²⁷ This is the so-called "long" chronology, which assumes that the "mild" (*remissa fuit*) Springs mentioned in *Ep.* 23 and 67 refer to two separate seasons, in 63 and 64 CE respectively. Alternatively, the "short" chronology understands *Ep.* 23 and 67 to refer to the same season, the Spring of 64 CE. Although several earlier scholars, including Griffin (1992, 400) have favoured the shorter chronology, Setaioli (2014, 191) thinks it unlikely that Seneca would have been able to compose 45 letters in just a part of the Spring of 64 CE. For an outline of the two arguments, see Setaioli 2014, 191-2.

²⁸ Griffin (1992, 418) calculates about 10-15 additional letters. It is possible that more letters existed after book 22.

²⁹ Setaioli 2014, 192 n. 11.

³⁰ *Ep.* 91 is written after July 64, while 122 is likely written during the later Autumn of 64 CE. Griffin (1992, 418) numbers this stretch to forty days.

³¹ Fantham 2010, xxi.

³² Griffin (1992, 417) notes 14 instances in which Seneca purports to be replying to the contents of Lucilius' letter directly.

to how this delay impedes the correspondence; here, he explains that moment-to-moment advice may be redundant by the time it reaches Lucilius, highlighting the way transport delays their conversation. We must consider that the ships carrying these letters, travelling between the mainland and Sicily, must have departed on their own schedules; in *Ep.* 77.1-3, purportedly written from Naples, Seneca writes that his mail is delivered by a fleet of Alexandrian grain ships. Here, Lucilius would know that Seneca was in Naples, given that the preceding *Ep.* 76 is also written from there. It seems likely that Lucilius entrusted his reply with one of the ships already *en route* to Naples.

Some scholars³³ have assumed that parts of the *Epistulae Morales* were exchanged via the *cursus publicus*, established by Augustus to expedite imperial letters (Suetonius, *Augustus* 49.3). In truth, there is no indication in the text that this was the case. More importantly, the *cursus publicus* was reserved for administrative and military correspondence, as opposed to personal letters between friends such as the *Epistulae Morales*.

Besides the instance described above, where Seneca collects his mail from a docking ship, there are a few other examples of Lucilius' letters being delivered by a courier (*tabellarius*). In *Ep.* 3.1, 50.1, and perhaps *Ep.* 11.1, Seneca tells Lucilius of his conversations with these couriers.³⁴ The *tabellarii* who carried private correspondence between elite Romans were slaves, freedmen, or clients of the correspondents.³⁵ They occupied an important, though sometimes understated, role in the exchange. As Wilcox explains, the author of the letter likely employed a retinue of *tabellarii* who became familiar with the addressee;³⁶ the interaction between the letter's bearer and addressee served to complement the content of the letter and the *amicitia* of the sender and the addressee. Wilcox continues that the messenger can even be thought of as an "extension of his master".³⁷ In a recent chapter on the importance of couriers in Cicero's epistolary exchange, Schröder calls the letter bearer "living paratext".³⁸ As we find described in Cicero's letters, certain couriers proved more trustworthy than

³³ Griffin 1992, 417; Fantham 2010, xxi. In contrast, Graver (1982, 15) is inclined to reject this view.

³⁴ *Ep.* 3 in particular presents an interesting case regarding the conventions of ancient epistolary exchange, as discussed below.

³⁵ Wilcox 2012, 18.

³⁶ Wilcox 2002, 31.

³⁷ Wilcox 2002, 65.

³⁸ Schröder 2018, 85.

others; the departure of letters containing more sensitive information was delayed when Cicero could not find a dependable courier (*Ad Att.* 1.13). Both praise and criticism of the couriers is relayed in these letters. *Ad Fam.* 4.9 sees the praise of a courier's *fides*, while in *Ad Att.* 7.1 Cicero scrutinises the tardiness of a messenger who had departed earlier. Of course, Cicero does not include criticism in a message entrusted to the same courier it criticises, as that same courier may peruse the contents.³⁹

Given the possibility that a courier was privy to a letter's contents, Seneca's *Epistle 3* portrays an interesting relationship between author, addressee and courier; Lucilius' letter is purportedly delivered by a friend of his (*amico tuo*, *Ep.* 3.1). The messenger's exact relationship to Lucilius is left a mystery,⁴⁰ though he is likely a dependent or freedman. Unlike in Cicero's letters, even the name of Lucilius' courier is left unmentioned. Yet, the letter's content is framed by Lucilius' friendship with the messenger: Seneca criticises Lucilius' self-contradiction in considering the courier a friend, while at the same time asking Seneca not to divulge information about Lucilius to the courier (*Ep.* 3.1).⁴¹ Seneca here overturns the conventions of epistolary exchange. In a Ciceronian letter of recommendation, the qualities and merits of the client-courier are discussed. In contrast, Seneca dismisses the courier's presence, merely acknowledging him to introduce a pedagogical opportunity aimed at Lucilius. Indeed, while both parts of the exchange necessitate a courier, both authors downplay his importance. On Lucilius' side, we are led to believe that he entrusts the courier with the very letter in which he announces his distrust towards him! It is possible that the carrier of *Ep.* 3 is trustworthy enough in the eyes of Lucilius that he will not inspect the contents of the letter; regardless, it is still odd that Lucilius attempts to exclude the courier from the conversation.

Should this be considered a factor against genuineness, an example of 'skilful simulation'? Not necessarily – this can be seen as a mark of either genuineness or fictionality. When Cicero complains that he has not been able to find a trustworthy courier (*Ad Att.* 1.13), he too risks this criticism being read by the courier carrying the letter:

³⁹ Schröder 2018, 90-1.

⁴⁰ The messenger's identity is possibly left anonymous on purpose; see Wilcox 2012, 118-9.

⁴¹ In Seneca's mind a friend is to be trusted completely. See *Ep.* 3.2-4.

Three letters from you have now come to hand. In them you challenged a reply, but I have been rather slow in making one because I can't find a trustworthy carrier. There are so few who can carry a letter of any substance without lightening the weight by perusal.

It is plausible that the exchange between Seneca and Lucilius occurred exactly as described, with both parties downplaying the role of the courier. As stated, barely any of Seneca's letters mention means of transportation. In the case of *Ep.* 3, the courier only serves as a catalyst to introduce the proper topic of the letter: Seneca's conceptualisation of an ideal philosophical friendship. The fact that Seneca introduces this all too familiar aspect of Roman epistolary exchange can just as easily be seen as a sign of genuineness. If the correspondence is fictional, there would be no need to involve the courier; the topic of the letter would be introduced in a different manner.

Clearly the courier occupied a crucial role in Roman epistolary exchange. Furthermore, couriers – especially trustworthy ones – were at times difficult to find. As Schröder explains,⁴² Cicero takes every opportunity to correspond with his epistolary network, writing a letter anytime a courier is available. Even with nothing to write about, Cicero takes advantage of an available courier to maintain correspondence, as is the case in *Ad Familiares* 4.10. A fitting parallel comes from Pliny's letter to Servianus (3.17). Not hearing from Servianus for some time, and experiencing anxiety for his wellbeing, Pliny offers to sponsor a private messenger to deliver a letter from his correspondent. More than just highlighting the necessity of a courier, the exchange shows that the 'supply' of couriers was irregular.

Moreover, Seneca's epistolary praxis differed in some ways from that of Cicero's. As far as the regularity of the exchange is concerned, the few references Seneca makes reveal almost nothing: generally, the sentiment is that exchange should be more frequent, with Lucilius placing the onus of response on Seneca (*Ep.* 38.1, 106.1, 118.1), though this sentiment – 'we should write more' – is not uncommon in letters. As Seneca makes clear to Lucilius in *Ep.* 118.1-2, he will not imitate Cicero in writing when he has nothing to say, nor will he fill his letters with the problems of others. Instead, as the letters suggest, they are composed either as a reply to a letter from Lucilius, or when a philosophical topic comes to mind.

⁴² Schröder (2018, 8-9ff).

It is possible, as Griffin suggests,⁴³ that a delay in the sending of letters could lead to a backlog, causing several of the letters to be sent together as a packet when a *tabellarius* became available. Alternatively, several letters could be in transit simultaneously, with various complications arising when the correspondents reply to older letters bearing outdated information. Schafer aptly highlights that the stretch of letters from *Ep.* 50-59 is one instance where a packet of letters may have been sent.⁴⁴ As mentioned earlier, *Ep.* 50 is the first letter Seneca receives from Lucilius for several months. After he replies, Seneca undertakes a sojourn in Campania, composing letters 49-58 as a sort of diary that record his travels. Seneca's journey may have taken months, and it is not until *Ep.* 59 that we learn of Seneca receiving another letter from Lucilius.⁴⁵ Seneca probably sent all the Campanian together.

As Schafer claims, letters 60-62 are an example of several letters in transit at once; here, *Ep.* 61 and 62 serve as a sort of post-script to *Ep.* 60.⁴⁶ This triad of letters begins with Seneca admonishing Lucilius for his preoccupation with material goods.⁴⁷ Quickly realising the harsh nature of his letter, though not quickly enough to stop its departure, Seneca then writes *Ep.* 61. In this second letter, rather than criticising his pupil, Seneca explains how his life was made better by temperance. Finally, in *Ep.* 62, Seneca reflects on his initial outburst and wishes he had never developed a want for material gain in the first place. Seneca offers the Cynic Demetrius as an *exemplum* (*Ep.* 62.3) and encourages Lucilius to despise wealth as he does. The three letters are sent in quick succession, with the intention that Lucilius would not be left with the disheartening first letter for too long.

According to Griffin, the fact that Seneca sent letters without waiting for a reply, or in packets, "take[s] all meaning out of the phrase 'genuine correspondence'".⁴⁸ As I have argued, however, the difficulties in transporting letters, the necessity of a courier, and the fact that the addressee was often on the move, renders these practices commonplace in Roman epistolary exchange. These practices are evident in other Roman epistolary collections, not just the *Epistulae Morales*. Even Cicero, the Roman letter-writer *par excellence*, sent letters to friends before receiving a reply (*Ad Fam.* 4.9, *Ad Att.* 6.9.4,

⁴³ Griffin 1992, 418.

⁴⁴ Schafer 2011, 46. Henderson 2004, 32-5.

⁴⁵ Schafer 2011, 46.

⁴⁶ Schafer 2011, 48-9.

⁴⁷ Which Lucilius must have mentioned in a reply to *Ep.* 59.

⁴⁸ Griffin 1992, 418.

7.1); this is done to take advantage of an available messenger, or because his previous letter left with a sluggish courier. For Seneca, the frequency of the correspondence is protracted due to its need to cross the sea and because both parties were often on the move.⁴⁹ In short, Griffin's criteria for genuine ancient correspondence, which the *Epistulae Morales* do not meet, are far too restrictive. As this section has shown, Roman epistolary exchange was a far more nuanced, chaotic and inconsistent affair than Griffin allows for.

1.4 The Letter as a Physical Artefact

The previous section examined what could be gleaned from the physical transportation of letters, roughly coinciding with criteria 3 and 5 in the characteristics listed by Trapp. In discussing the remaining criterion, the object's tangibility (2), I draw on examples from the text where Seneca treats the letter as a 'physical artefact'.

To treat the letter as a physical artefact, as Edwards explains,⁵⁰ is to make references within the text to the physical qualities of the epistle. As Altman states, the physical presence of the letter is often treated in a highly emotional manner, the letter itself serving as a bridge between sender and receiver.⁵¹ Fitzgerald writes that, in the case of Pliny, the physical letter represents a substitute for a conversation or social event.⁵² The same is true for Seneca, for whom the physical letter serves to place him in the company of Lucilius: "I receive your letter, and right away we are together" (*Ep.* 40.1). Besides references to the letter itself, authors treat the letter as a physical artefact when they refer to the letter-writing process. Here, I discuss the ways in which this device contributes to a feeling of genuineness in the letter.

Seneca's references to the letter itself betray a strong sense of self-awareness on behalf of the author. Often, this self-awareness serves to highlight the limitations of epistolary communication, cementing its inferiority to verbal speech. The previously mentioned conclusion of *Ep.* 45.13 is a subtle example of this; in this letter, Seneca complains of philosophers who engage in sophistry, syllogism and other intellectual pursuits which

⁴⁹ Lucilius around Sicily as part of his administrative duties (Fantham 2010, xxi). Aside from references in the letters, Tacitus (*Annals* 14.56) also attests that Seneca spent much time out of Rome after his retirement in 62 CE.

⁵⁰ Edwards 2015, 46.

⁵¹ Altman 1982, 13.

⁵² Fitzgerald 2007, 193.

he finds to be a waste of time. When closing the letter, Seneca claims he is cutting the letter short so as not to exceed the expected length of the letter (*Sed ne epistulae modum excedam*, *Ep.* 45.13). At other times, Seneca breaks the ‘fourth wall’ of the text to refer to the physical composition of the letter. At *Ep.* 55.11, Seneca references the sheets of papyri that carry his words to Lucilius (Graver & Long 2017, 530). In closing *Ep.* 22.13, Seneca comments that he had sealed the letter but forgot to include a philosophical *sententia* for Lucilius to ponder, causing him to reopen the dispatch.⁵³

According to Julius Victor, letters penned to close friends were written, or at the very least signed, by their author (*Ars Rhetorica* 27). This is true of Cicero’s letters, where the author’s closest friends would receive hand-written letters rather than ones dictated to a *librarius*.⁵⁴ By making overt references to the rituals of letter writing, Seneca reinforces the authenticity of his letters. Admittedly, the mention of these material characteristics is both a sign for and against genuineness; on the one hand, references to the physical characteristics are not uncommon in ‘real’ ancient epistles, such as the letters of Cicero and Pliny. On the other, as Wilcox suggests, letters which were not sent are “more likely to draw attention to their material condition” to uphold the epistolary illusion.⁵⁵ Here, both arguments seem equally valid. What is important to note, however, is the fact that Seneca claims to be writing these letters himself. As Schröder explains, Cicero would add to a dictated letter in his own hand when he did not wish his scribe to overhear something too private (*Ad Att.* 15.20.4).⁵⁶ As the *Epistulae Morales* claim to be hand-written, the reader is to believe that Seneca is more earnest in his writing, as his thoughts are not mediated or ‘filtered’ by a scribe.

It is difficult for scholars to make any concrete claims regarding the validity of the metatextual aspects found in the letters. The last two sections have examined how letters between Seneca and Lucilius might have been exchanged, in addition to discussing where and how Seneca refers to his writing rituals. These factors do give the impression that the *Epistulae Morales* are genuine letters. Figuring out the degree to which Seneca fictionalised these accounts is, at present, an unsolvable task. Once again, if we follow Griffin’s initial statement on genuineness, all these features may

⁵³ An exception to Edwards’ (2015, 46-7) claim that “there are no comments about handwriting or sealing” throughout the correspondence. Another appears at *Ep.* 41, where Seneca states that the sight of a friend’s handwriting works to connect author and reader.

⁵⁴ See Nicholson 1994, 57.

⁵⁵ Wilcox 2002, 31.

⁵⁶ Schröder 2018, 84.

be ‘skilful simulation’ on Seneca’s behalf. However, no substantial argument yet exists which disqualifies these letters from being seen as genuine. Whether viewing the letters as genuine or fictional, both are valid scholarly approaches. In what follows, I explore how our understanding of the *Epistulae Morales* may be enhanced by assuming that they are genuine letters.

1.5 Seneca’s Portrayal of Himself and Lucilius

With the metatextual factors examined, we now return to textual analysis, assuming for the time being that these are genuine letters. This lens alters one’s understanding of the *Epistulae Morales*, as the main result of these letters being genuine, rather than literary fiction, is the fact that they are written for exchange. That is, they are circulated and read by others. Naturally, the first recipient of the letter we might examine is its addressee. Being a medium that puts on display the relationship between two actors, letters also provide much insight into their author. For this reason, I examine the portrayal of Seneca and Lucilius in tandem. The purpose of this endeavour is to get a clearer idea of Seneca’s goals in conducting this grand philosophical project.

In the epistolary exchange, Seneca and Lucilius each plays the role of close friend and confidante to one another. Throughout the letters, Seneca adopts a range of responsibilities towards his friend, some of which can seem contradictory. For instance, early on, Seneca establishes himself as the senior member of the duo and a mentor to Lucilius (*Ep.* 1.1, 16.2). Through Lucilius’ interlocution in these early letters, we learn that he is seeking advice from Seneca on the specifics of living a good life (eg. *Ep.* 7.1). However, come *Ep.* 27, Lucilius criticises Seneca’s apparent hypocrisy in advising another person on matters of ethics before having his own affairs in order. Seneca defends his supposed hypocrisy by renegotiating, or clarifying, his envisioned responsibility to Lucilius (*Ep.* 27.1): “I am not so presumptuous that I would offer medical care while ill, but rather I would throw myself in the same sickroom, from where I share a common malady with you and impart remedies.”⁵⁷

As the letters continue, Seneca reminds Lucilius that he is not a doctor, but a fellow patient (*non medicus, sed aeger*; *Ep.* 68.9), though he continues to play the role of the more experienced counterpart, doling out advice to Lucilius and instructing him what

⁵⁷ Translation my own.

to pursue and avoid. Edwards draws attention to the fact that this is not the only way in which Seneca is inconsistent in his self-representation, often relating his thoughts through the ‘voice’ of a range of stock characters.⁵⁸ In *Ep.* 12, for example, Seneca recounts a trip to his villa near Rome⁵⁹ and adopts the character of an elderly Roman concerned with his estates. A recurring theme in this letter is the comparison between the crumbling stonework and Seneca’s own ageing body (*Ep.* 12.1 & 4). Much of the first section of this letter consists of Seneca chastising the majordomo for allowing the house to decay (12.1), neglecting the flora (12.2), and for employing elderly staff at the residence (12.3). In letters that precede this one, Seneca has already instructed Lucilius not to covet wealth (2.6; 5.3) and exercise self-restraint (5.4). Repeatedly, Seneca scolds Lucilius for his preoccupation with things the Stoics would consider ‘indifferent’.⁶⁰ In the 12th letter, we find Seneca portraying himself as one who has made very little moral progress.

Ep. 12 provides an example of another of Seneca’s inconsistencies; as Griffin explains, there is a “lack of clarity in the indications of their [Seneca’s and Lucilius’] relative ages”.⁶¹ In a humorous revelation, Seneca privately communicates to Lucilius that the stonework was laid under his direction, the trees planted by his own hand, and that the elderly servant had been a playmate of a much younger Seneca (*Ep.* 12.1-4). The crumbling estate serves to mirror Seneca’s own ageing body. If this building – constructed in his own lifetime – is decaying, how dire is the state of his own body? Yet despite reporting an aging body, illness,⁶² and near-fatal asthma attacks (*Ep.* 54), Seneca is still able to make frequent and lengthy trips around Italy without complaint.⁶³ At one stage, upon hearing of Lucilius’ successful moral progress, Seneca writes that he has become ‘young’ again, in the same way as “one who sees a protégé reach adulthood always feels as if it were his own coming of age” (*Ep.* 34.1). Returning to Griffin’s objection, the discrepancy between the ages of the two parties is never made clear; in fact, Seneca is fickle when referring to their respective ages. Admittedly,

⁵⁸ Edwards 2008, 98.

⁵⁹ Graver & Long believe this to be the same villa in which Seneca expired (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.60).

⁶⁰ *adiaphora*; eg. 24.1-2; 60.1-2. At *Ep.* 74.16-17 Seneca offers an in-depth discussion of these philosophical terms.

⁶¹ Griffin 1992, 417.

⁶² By which I mean literal illness, as opposed to the figurative illness of *Ep.* 27.

⁶³ These include the trips to various *villae* (*Ep.* 12; 55; 86; 104; 123), the month long tour of Campania (*Ep.* 49-59), and other trips where his living conditions are less than comfortable (*Ep.* 87.1-2).

biographical information about Lucilius is sparse for a collection of letters.⁶⁴ From what we can glean, Lucilius was only slightly younger than Seneca (*Ep.* 35.2).⁶⁵ In some instances, the impression is given that Lucilius is considerably younger: at the very start of the letters, Seneca encourages Lucilius to make a start on philosophical progress before old age is upon him (*Ep.* 1.5). Here, Seneca imagines the time each person has left as a sort of currency; whereas Seneca is a “big spender” (*Ep.* 1.4), Lucilius is portrayed as one who has a significant amount remaining and is encouraged to conserve and make the most of what he has left. In contrast, there are several instances where the pair is made to seem similar in age; in *Ep.* 19.1, for example, Seneca writes that old age is upon them both, while at *Ep.* 96.3, he comments that a malaise Lucilius complains about is to be expected in old age (*senectus*).

Griffin does not find it convincing that Seneca could have addressed a close friend in these differing ways in a medium that emphasises the intimacy of two individuals.⁶⁶ This tension has, to some extent, been resolved by scholars who recognise Seneca’s self-representation within the *Epistulae Morales* as multifaceted, and introspective in a multi-layered manner.⁶⁷ Through this approach, scholars have described two Senecan ‘selves’ present throughout the letters: the first is the occurrent self, the imperfect Seneca who is “prone to a multitude of lapses”⁶⁸ and is a fellow invalid alongside Lucilius.⁶⁹ The other is the normative self, an idealised version of the self that Seneca aspires to. However, the inconsistencies in Seneca’s conversations with Lucilius should be seen as symptomatic of an epistolary work. That is, inconsistent writing and lapses in one’s character do not seem out of place in a medium that resembles unstudied conversation. In reference to Seneca’s dual role as instructor and pupil, even Graver concedes “many people alternately patronise and cajole their friends” and that “some inconsistency in this regard might be accepted as a sign of authenticity rather than the reverse”.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Relatively speaking. Russel (1974, 75) conversely writes that the letters “supply a fair amount of biographical detail”.

⁶⁵ See Griffin 1992, 91 and n.4.

⁶⁶ Griffin 1992, 417.

⁶⁷ Bartsch 2015, 188.

⁶⁸ Edwards 2015, 46.

⁶⁹ Long 2006, 366-8.

⁷⁰ Graver 1996, 21. It should be noted that what Graver finds issue with is how varied the roles Lucilius fills are, varying from pupil to interlocutor to exemplar.

As Wilson has pointed out, the *Epistulae Morales* are grounded in Seneca's personal experiences, and the author himself believes he is undergoing a process of transformation (*transfigurari*, *Ep.* 6.1).⁷¹ This transformation is imagined as a form of introspection that seeks to correct the faults in one's character. The epistolary genre can incorporate these inconsistencies in character, as each new epistle allows Seneca to resituate himself in a new mood, time, or place. At times, this shift in mood can even be seen throughout a single letter, as is the case in *Ep.* 46. In this brief letter, Seneca begins by praising a book written by Lucilius with great enthusiasm (46.1-2) before concluding the letter by saying he will share more thoughts on the book in the future once his opinion has settled (46.3). The final section of this letter shows a "marked change in tone, almost as if it were written some hours later".⁷² In closing the letter, Seneca is reflective regarding the unbridled enthusiasm he displayed at its opening; some of the earlier praise is revoked when he realises that "it is as if [he] had heard these things rather than read them" (*tamquam audierim illa, non legerim*, *Ep.* 46.3). In this brief letter, then, the author's reflective and meditative process is put on display in epistolary form. The initial part of the letter is full of vigour, while the latter half is reflective of this earlier gusto.

This brief look at the self-reflective project which Seneca undertakes for both himself and Lucilius helps illustrate a vital strand in the letters.⁷³ The *Epistulae Morales* are a philosophically transformative project for both Seneca and Lucilius. Seneca's goal is to confront moral faults and engage in philosophical progress. To this end, the moral advice within the work is aimed as much at himself as at Lucilius. Seneca's friend serves as a pupil to practice philosophy with, as Seneca himself suggests in several early letters (*Ep.* 3, 6, 9). As Seneca himself writes,

even if the sage is self-sufficient, he still wants to have a friend. If for no other reason, he wants to keep such a great virtue from going unused. [...] it is to have someone whom he himself may sit beside in illness, whom he himself may liberate from an enemy's capture. (*Ep.* 9.8)

⁷¹ Wilson 2001, 167.

⁷² Wilson 1987, 106.

⁷³ The full extent of this topic is beyond the scope of this thesis and has been covered elsewhere in much more detail than can be afforded in this section notably Bartsch (2015), Edwards (2008, esp. 28-30; 2015), Graver (1996), Schafer (2014).

As Seneca sentimentally explains here, the purpose of his friendship with Lucilius is to cultivate virtue, and conversely, to have virtue cultivated in himself.

1.6 Seneca's Audience

It has become apparent that Seneca set out to write these epistles to establish a line of communication concerned with ethical development and reflection. If this correspondence was genuine, then Lucilius was acquainted with these letters. Who else was privy to these letters? As mentioned earlier, Seneca began writing this series of letters with the intention of publication and hinted at an audience beyond just Lucilius (*Ep.* 8.2).⁷⁴ A few initial observations will help to get a better sense of the possible scope of the audience: Seneca is exceptional among his Stoic contemporaries for writing in Latin rather than Greek; this fact, alongside Seneca's decision to discuss subjects familiar with a Roman audience – shared history and mythology, as an example – suggests that the letters were intended for a more general audience.⁷⁵ Still, one must keep in mind that the potential reader would have had to be literate, in addition to having the means and connections to access these letters. A quick look at Roman epistolary habits will help to narrow down the scope of Seneca's audience.

Firstly, how private were Roman letters? Letters in Roman society carried a complex expectation of privacy. As Cicero writes in *Ad Familiares* 15.21.4: “We write, in one way, letters intended solely for those to whom we send them, and another way when we think they will reach many readers.”⁷⁶ Yet letter writers in antiquity were most likely aware of the fact that the letter could be circulated without their consent. Cicero's correspondences are replete with instances where letters are enclosed with other letters and are thereby circulated beyond their initial addressee. In *Ad Atticum* 11.9, Cicero describes him and two friends opening a letter written by his brother; though Cicero comments how this is against convention, the letter shows how easily that convention is broken. As Wilcox observes, rules about epistolary privacy were often ignored, and could even be deliberately manipulated by a particularly skilled author. That is, the wily author may pen a letter under the guise of privacy when they

⁷⁴ Edwards 2015, 42.

⁷⁵ Habinek 2014, 27; Wilson 1987, 103-4.

⁷⁶ Translation by Wilcox (2012, 8).

wanted its contents to be public.⁷⁷ Wilcox sums it up as follows: “given the premium placed on public visibility in Rome, men in Cicero’s milieu often would have welcomed the wider circulation of letters that formally claimed to be private”.⁷⁸

This practice of letter circulation is what Seneca had in mind when composing the *Epistulae Morales*. The fact that the collection was published – some parts probably while he was still alive⁷⁹ – proves that there was no expectation of any actual privacy. The moral advice espoused in the letters was intended for a general elite Roman audience, not merely for Lucilius. The advice given relates to common moral dilemmas faced by this audience; *Ep.* 47, for example, famously deals with the humanity of slaves and argues for a more compassionate manner in dealing with one’s servants. For many pages, Seneca argues against an imagined interlocutor; the reader might mistake these objections as coming from Lucilius, but as Seneca reveals at both the beginning and the end of the letter, Lucilius already treats his slaves well (*Ep.* 47.1 & 19-21). There is no need for Seneca to moralise on the subject to Lucilius. However, when we consider the fact that Seneca intended the letter to be circulated amongst an elite Roman audience, the purpose of this particular letter becomes clear. This line of reasoning only becomes apparent if one considers the *Epistulae Morales* genuine letters. Through this lens, as Setaioli explains, they become “open letters”.⁸⁰

On the basis of this close examination of the finer details in the *Epistulae Morales*, one arrives at a plausible understanding of the ways in which this work fits in with the cultural and literary context in which it was produced. Seneca intended his moral philosophy to be circulated amongst a particular elite section of Roman society. His correspondence with Lucilius served as a catalyst through which he could deliver these moral messages. As Edwards correctly states, Roman letters put on the show of being a “low-key, ‘private’ genre of writing”.⁸¹ In truth, these letters, which only purport to be private, were widely circulated. During a time when Seneca found his political career in rapid decline and his literary works under scrutiny, letters proved to be a

⁷⁷ See further Wilcox (2012, 8-9) who discusses this tactic with regards to the letters of Cicero.

⁷⁸ Wilcox 2012, 8.

⁷⁹ Edwards 2019, 4. See also the discussion of Griffin 1992, 418 and n. 4.

⁸⁰ Setaioli 2014, 194.

⁸¹ Edwards 2017, 173.

genre through which commentary on Neronian Rome might be shared in a covert and safe manner.⁸²

⁸² See further Wilson 2015, 144-5.

CHAPTER 2

Ideology and Politics in the Age of Nero

Introduction

One of the previous chapter's significant conclusions was that Seneca's letters were intended for an audience far broader than just their immediate addressee. His *Epistulae Morales* were intended to be distributed and read by senators and other aristocratic, literate Romans during Nero's reign. This chapter analyses the political background that surrounds the writing of the letters and highlights the important points of moral contention under Nero's reign. Furthermore, in my analysis of the age of Nero, I pay special attention to Seneca's role throughout this turbulent reign, in particular regarding his understanding of tyranny and the seemingly hypocritical way he both criticises and supports a would-be tyrant. The dynamic that emerges in this chapter is a sort of tug-of-war amongst those close to Nero for influence over the emperor.

Whereas the previous chapter examined several textual and metatextual features of the *Epistulae Morales*, this chapter is chiefly concerned with the political circumstances that precede their writing. Through a close reading of Seneca's political treatises alongside the various sources which describe his political actions, one will notice several ideas regarding virtue and rulership, which are essential in understanding the political milieu of the time. Since Seneca revisits many of these ideas in the *Epistulae Morales*, this investigation will result in a more nuanced understanding of the letters.¹

The reign of Nero was unique among the Julio-Claudians. The young, inexperienced emperor offered a blank page upon which the ideal ruler could be imprinted. From 49 CE, Seneca played a crucial role as one of Nero's tutors and undoubtedly exerted a great deal of influence over his upbringing during those formative years. The first part of this chapter (2.1) examines Seneca's understanding of ideal rulership. This investigation is framed through Seneca's first-hand experiences with tyrannical behaviour and vices both before and directly after Nero's accession. I will argue that

¹ This approach is what Griffin (1992, 1-9) had in mind for her seminal study. For a more recent approach along the same lines, see Davies (2015, esp. 69-70).

Seneca's views regarding Nero's predecessors are unfavourable and that, in his capacity as Nero's guardian, he would attempt to guide his ward away from the vices he observes.

The second part of this chapter (2.2) analyses Nero's descent into tyranny while simultaneously observing Seneca's role as his chief advisor. I track Nero's progression towards tyranny through a timeline that focuses on specific events highlighted by Tacitus. I conclude that Nero's tyrannical behaviour can largely be ascribed to an imperial political system in which the emperor's authority and – and position – was continually under scrutiny. This section also examines the role of *clementia* throughout the emperor's reign, a virtue that is at various times used and abused in Neronian politics.

In the final section (2.3), I address a topic related to Nero's decline, that of theatricality under his reign. Initially, Nero's reign promised an emperor whose approach to politics was relatively 'hands-off'. Here, I show the ways in which performance and theatricality seep into the political sphere and how the emperor exerts political influence through (and from) the stage. This part of the chapter establishes a dynamic in which the emperor, by utilising the stage, establishes his authority over elite Romans through a degree of social control.

2.1 Antecedents for Seneca's Conception of Tyranny

At the accession of Nero in 54 CE, Seneca was in a prominent position as tutor and advisor of the young *princeps*. Seneca had considerable influence over Nero during this time, and given his disapproval of Nero's predecessors, would have likely tried to steer the new emperor away from the vices of his forerunners, Gaius (Caligula, 37-41 CE) and Claudius (41-54 CE). Throughout Seneca's works, any mention of Gaius or Claudius invariably serves to highlight shortcomings in their character or political competence. In Seneca's didactic programme, these two emperors served as excellent counterexamples to the ideal he envisioned for Nero's reign. Of course, there were certain difficulties involved in critiquing Claudius, who was the current emperor's adoptive father and uncle. While some license for commentary was certainly permitted

– once those emperors were deceased – open criticism remained a hazardous course.² This pattern certainly seems to hold more true for the critique of Claudius than that of Gaius, by which I mean that Senecan critiques of Claudius appear to be more oblique, whereas critiques of Gaius are more direct.

The depiction of Gaius throughout the dialogues is demonstrably hostile. Seneca attributes his tyrannical behaviour to a multitude of vices. Among the numerous examples of Gaius' vices which pepper Seneca's treatises, it is most fruitful for this investigation to focus on his cruelty (*crudelitas*). Seneca paints a most gruesome picture of Gaius' reign in *De Ira* 3.18:

In recent years Gaius Caesar flogged with the whip and tortured on a single day Sextus Papinius, whose father had held the consulship, Betilienus Bassus, his own quaestor and the son of his own praetor, and other, both senators and knights, not for the purpose of seeking evidence but to gratify his anger.

Cassius Dio (LIX.25) provides some much-needed context for this anecdote: according to his history, the two senators mentioned were involved in a plot against the *princeps*.³ Gaius tortured Papinius once the conspiracy was discovered, persuading him to reveal the other plot members before executing several of them. Bassus was one of these conspirators and is said to have been killed in front of his father, Capito, who is presumably the praetor mentioned by Seneca.

Seneca's anecdotes emphasise several elements in Gaius' *crudelitas* and tyranny. As he argues in *De Clementia*, the wellbeing of the *princeps* – as head of state – benefits the *res publica* if he is a virtuous leader (1.4). The *princeps* might be justified in killing another for the good of the public; a tyrant, however, takes pleasure in such cruelty (*Clem.* 1.12). Gaius' punishments are excessive in their cruelty and inhumanity and are not performed for judicial purposes. Seneca repeatedly highlights that it is Roman elites – senators and knights – who are tortured and interrogated through means considered more appropriate for a slave (*De Ira* 3.19).

² Hence, for example, the way Seneca contrasts the new reign of Nero with his immediate predecessor, Claudius. The criticism of Claudius is understood by his inferiority to the new emperor. See Braund 1998, esp. 73.

³ The plot was conceived after Gaius returned from his failed campaign to Britain. Dio claims the Senate was threatened by Gaius for not “[voting] him divine honours”. According to Suetonius (*Caligula* 48) Gaius publicly threatened the senate for not giving him a triumph, though he had earlier threatened to execute any senator who proposed such a ceremony.

The choice to focus on the elite victims of Gaius' reign provides an insight into Seneca's reason for recounting these atrocities. As Griffin reflects, many of his contemporaries lived through the tyranny of Gaius and would have feared a repeat of such a tumultuous ruler.⁴ Though addressed to his elder brother, Novatus, the choice of *exempla* hint at an intention to reach a wider audience.⁵ As Lavery highlights, it is noteworthy that Seneca's anecdotes focus on the familial relations of the persecuted aristocrats as if to fixate on "Caligula's lack of basic human decency".⁶ Following the story of Papinius and Bassus above (*De Ira* 3.19), Seneca adds that Gaius also executed the fathers of the conspirators. This additional detail is meant to be shocking to the audience and demonstrates how the anger of a tyrant "not only vents its fury on individual men but whole populations [*gentes*]" (*quae non tantum viritim furit sed gentes totas lancinat, De Ira* 3.19). In other words, Seneca warns his audience that the anger of tyrants threatens the families of his elite audience. In the second book of *De Ira* (2.33), Seneca relates the story of Pastor, a Roman *eques* whose son is executed by Gaius because the emperor was offended by his elegant clothing and hair. Following this, Gaius invites Pastor to a banquet; the father obliges, for he fears that offending the *princeps* would endanger his other son. Many of these senators and knights had friends, family, patrons or clients who were persecuted in that time. This serves as more than an emotional appeal to Seneca's aristocratic audience regarding the dangers of *ira*: it is a reminder of the dangers of tyranny.

In *De Ira*, Seneca goes to great lengths to draw a connection between the anger of Gaius and tyranny. The way Seneca describes anger – as forcing the hands of those in charge to enact cruel punishments which exceed the crime – has led some to believe this treatise was intended to be read by Claudius, or rulers in general.⁷ Without question, this early treatise outlines numerous characteristics Seneca associates with tyranny.

⁴ Griffin 1992, 213-5.

⁵ The treatise is Claudian, most likely composed after Seneca's recall from exile (49 CE), though the exact date of authorship is unknown. The *t.p.q.* could be placed around 41 CE, after the death of Caligula; and the *t.a.q.* possibly in 52-3 CE, as Novatus is referred to by his native name instead of his adopted name, Gallio. To further complicate the matter, the third book may have been added at a later date. See Monteleone 2014, 127-9.

⁶ Lavery 1987, 280.

⁷ The third book, in particular, contains many examples of rulers leveling their anger against their subjects. Examples vary from Roman rulers to Oriental kings (*De Ira* 3.14-7). See also Griffin 1992, 213, Monteleone 2014, 130.

While *De Ira* demonstrates the ways in which Gaius failed as a *princeps*, the satirical work *Apocolocyntosis* does so for Claudius. However, there are some notable differences in Claudius' shortcomings, according to Seneca. Cruelty, anger, pride (*superbia*) – these are the causes of Gaius' moral failures as an emperor. As with Gaius, Seneca focuses on the victims of Claudius' reign; unlike Gaius, however, Claudius' shortcomings as an emperor come from his abuses of power. Thus, while Gaius is painted as a tyrant through his vices, Claudius is marked as one by his abuse of power in the law courts.

Seneca's criticisms of Claudius' reign are most evident in the *Apocolocyntosis*, which describes a mock apotheosis of its subject. Eden has speculated that the satire was likely authored during the Saturnalia of 54 CE, two months after the death of its subject.⁸ If this is the case, the circumstances would have granted Seneca the license for the hyperbolic vitriol contained in this work. Outside of the *Apocolocyntosis*, Seneca is mostly neutral towards Claudius unless some ulterior motive demands praise.⁹ The occasion of the Saturnalia, however, permits frank speech against the former emperor.

Claudius' abuse of Roman judicial systems – arbitrarily presiding over cases, monopolising these legal procedures – is a motif repeated throughout our ancient sources (Suetonius, *Claud.* 14-15; Tacitus *Ann.* 13.3-4). Trials against senators, traditionally conducted by the senate, were overseen by the emperor in person, in his own home (Tacitus, *Ann.* 11.1-2). In the *Apocolocyntosis* (7.4-5), the emperor boasts that he has extended the months in which court sessions were held, with court hearings occurring both during the day and at night to accommodate Claudius' interference in the judicial system (Suet., *Claud.* 23). Seneca constructs a humorous scene in which, during Claudius' procession, lawyers are seen emerging from the shadows after being out of work for so long (*Apocol.* 12.2).

As a result of this judicial takeover, numerous imperial family members, senators, and *equites* were condemned. Seneca puts the number at thirty-five senators, three hundred

⁸ Eden 1984, 5.

⁹ The *Consolation to Polybius*, for example, praises Claudius' *clementia*, his noble duty as *princeps*, and compares him favourably to Gaius (*Cons. Polyb.* 7.2, 13). Though the philosophical content of such praise is consistent with Seneca's other works, the praise itself is a clear plea for a return from exile and should not be seen as a reflection of Seneca's true thoughts towards Claudius. Griffin 1992, 210 & 216. On the consistency of Seneca's philosophical ideas despite this attempt at flattery, see Bartsch 2017, 158.

and twenty-one *equites*, and countless others, a charge repeated almost word-for-word by Suetonius (*Claud.* 29). In the *Apocolocyntosis*, the deified Augustus vetoes Claudius' deification by listing the victims of his reign. Augustus passes over the numerous public deaths under Claudius, instead focusing on those nearer to the imperial household. Being the progenitor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and an emperor typically associated with familial piety, Augustus is the perfect figurehead to reprimand Claudius. Seneca seems to convey that an emperor's household must be for a successful reign. "The knee is nearer than the shin" is the maxim used by Augustus (*Apocol.* 10.4) to demonstrate this point; an ordered household (the knee) precedes an orderly state.¹⁰ On this account, Seneca shows that Claudius failed in a spectacular fashion. Augustus cites his many offences, beginning with the deaths of his own blood relatives: the death of two great-granddaughters, one great-great grandson, and Messalina, his great-great-niece. Next, he moves on to Claudius' own household, but does not finish the list as it proves too long (*Apocol.* 10-11). In his judgement, Augustus deems Claudius worse than Gaius in this regard (11.2). Later in the satire, when Claudius descends to the afterlife, he is greeted by all his victims. In addition to the family members he killed, Seneca lists numerous senators and *equites* by name (13.4).

Seneca's intention in listing these victims of Claudius' reign is like the way Gaius' treatment of Roman elite families is highlighted in *De Ira*: he wishes to remind his audience of the friends and family members they lost under a tyrant who abused the judicial institutions of the state. If the *Apocolocyntosis* was disseminated among a closer circle of aristocrats, including Nero, Seneca's decision to focus on the importance of an orderly imperial household becomes even more obvious. Seneca here warns the young Nero against his predecessors' shortcomings.

In addition to Seneca's judgements against Claudius in the *Apocolocyntosis*, there is one other passing reference to Claudius in the dialogues that comments on his poor statesmanship. In *De Clementia* 1.23, Seneca refers to Claudius' liberal use of the sack (*poena cullei*), an ancient and gruesome method used to punish parricides. Seneca uses this anecdote in his petition for clemency to demonstrate that punishments are inadequate deterrents, as they only serve to legitimise that crime. By highlighting this paradoxical effect of punishment, Seneca hopes to encourage the new *princeps* to

¹⁰ Eden 1984, 119.

adopt the opposite approach, one that is partial to pardon rather than punishment. Earlier in *De Clementia* (1.15), Seneca even commends the lenient judgement of Augustus, who opted for a milder punishment against a wealthy Roman's son that had planned to kill his father; the clement judgement of Augustus contrasts against the excessive punishments of Claudius. In using Claudius as the example of a ruler who lacked *clementia*, Seneca indirectly states that the former emperor did not embody *iustitia*.

Through this exploration of Seneca's views on Nero's predecessors, one can begin to understand how Seneca tried to stop the new *princeps* from emulating tyrannical behaviour. The behaviour of these predecessors illustrates two ways in which an emperor might exhibit tyrannical dispositions. In the case of Gaius, it was his personal vices that marked him as a tyrant, as evidenced by the anecdotes which highlight his cruelty, anger, and pride. Claudius, however, is shown to rule in an ineffective manner by the way he abuses Roman institutions. He lacks the capability of exhibiting certain virtues associated with just rule – clemency, justice – and his annexing of judicial procedures results in the death of numerous Roman elites, including members of the imperial household.

2.2 Nero as Tyrant and Seneca's Role as *Amicus Principis*

While the previous section established Senecan ideas about what poor rulership entails, here I examine Seneca's political activities as Nero's chief advisor in a more practical sense. Despite receiving a great deal of attention in the *Annals*,¹¹ Tacitus' recount of Seneca as a political actor reveals surprisingly little.¹² Tacitus tends to gloss over the contents of the speeches Seneca wrote for Nero, focusing instead on their reception.¹³ This lack of detail is frustrating, as the contents of those speeches would have greatly aided our understanding of Seneca as a political actor. Lacking the content of these speeches, Seneca's dialogues become the most appropriate complement to Tacitus'

¹¹ As Griffin (1992, 441) highlights, the space devoted to Seneca in the *Annals* rivals the likes of Agrippina, Sejanus, and Corbulo.

¹² Though, admittedly, Tacitus provides more of an insight as to Seneca's political *career* than Seneca himself. As Syme (1958, vol. 2 552) remarks, "without the testimony of Tacitus, Seneca the statesman could hardly exist".

¹³ The occasions include Nero's accession (13.3), shows of *clementia* (13.11), and the address regarding the murder of Agrippina (14.11).

histories. As the previous section showed, many of Seneca's works are incidentally political. *De Clementia*, however, stands apart from the other treatises as a work with explicit political intentions: the political theory found in this treatise is addressed explicitly to Nero to demonstrate the virtues of a just ruler. Seneca aims to guide the young emperor by using models of clemency which contrast with the tyrannical predecessors discussed in the previous section.

In tracking the development of Nero's tyranny and Seneca's role as his chief advisor, it is most fruitful to focus on events Tacitus finds noteworthy. Many scholars have reflected on Tacitus' depiction of Nero's "declension towards tyranny".¹⁴ The year of 62 CE, marked by the death of Burrus and Seneca's retirement, is clearly an important turning point and marks the culmination of the study presented in this chapter. Before Seneca's withdrawal from politics, there are three events that hint at Nero's tyrannical nature: the murder of Britannicus in 55 CE, the murder of Agrippina in 59 CE, and the trial of Antistius Sosianus early in 62 CE. I focus on these three events specifically to analyse Seneca's involvement while fulfilling his role as *amicus principis*.¹⁵

2.2.1 Early Years and the Death of Britannicus

In comparison to the numerous prosecutions of Nero's predecessors, *clementia* was the watchword cultivated for the new age. The precedent for the emperor's *clementia* likely came from Augustus, whom Seneca often views as an exemplar. Following the civil war, the senate voted for a golden shield to be affixed to the *Curia Julia* with inscriptions that recognised Augustus' *virtutis clementiaeque et iustitiae et pietatis* ("courage, clemency, justice and piety", *Res Gestae* 34). To an emperor, *clementia* became an essential tool of office; the ability to exercise clemency over a subject that is deserving of retaliation or revenge is a display of the emperor's status. By its very nature, performing *clementia* establishes or reinforces a relationship based on hierarchy. Seneca, in promoting both the act and the image of *clementia* with Nero,

¹⁴ E.g., Syme 1958, vol. 1, 262-3; Griffin 1992, 423.

¹⁵ The murder of Octavia in 62 CE, the event which Tacitus makes the climax of Book 14, is also a crucial event that depicts Nero as a tyrant (*Ann.* 14.64). However, Seneca does not seem to have any part in this murder, given his retirement shortly before this event (*Ann.* 14.56).

effectively acknowledges the superior status of the emperor while advising a more humane treatment of his subjects.¹⁶

The early years of Nero's reign were marked by the optimism commonly afforded to a new *princeps* (Suetonius, *Nero* 10; Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.3-5).¹⁷ Following up on early promises of a just rule, Nero's first act of *clementia* was performed at the start of 55 CE. Plautius Lateranus, exiled under Claudius for an affair with Messalina, was recalled and reinstated to the senate. To capitalise on this event, Seneca wrote a series of speeches for Nero which expounded the clemency of the latter (*Ann.* 13.11). With this, the public image of the lenient *princeps* had been established.

The rift between Nero and Agrippina also began during this early period of optimism.¹⁸ The beginning of this feud is marked by Agrippina seeking to establish herself as a political power in the wake of Claudius' death. Tacitus begins the thirteenth book of the *Annals* with the words "The first death under the new principate was that of Junius Silanus, proconsul of Asia, and it was brought off by the machinations of Agrippina, without Nero's knowledge" (*Ann.* 13.1). Shortly after the murder of Silanus, Narcissus, another influential freedman, was also dispatched without the emperor's approval. With these examples Tacitus seems to establish Agrippina as a forceful player in Nero's court who transgresses her political boundaries and disregards her son's authority. This idea is made especially clear at *Ann.* 13.5 when Tacitus describes Agrippina sitting in on senatorial meetings, separated only by a curtain. According to Tacitus, Seneca seems to have opposed the influence of Agrippina (*Ann.* 13.2), even though she had orchestrated his recall and reinstatement to the senate. Tacitus also informs us that shortly before the murder of Britannicus, Nero had entrusted himself to Seneca over his mother: when Nero fell for the freedwoman Acte, Agrippina strongly opposed their relationship. In contrast, Seneca encouraged the young emperor in this relationship, even employing his client Annaeus Serenus as a proxy gift-giver to Acte (*Ann.* 13.12-3).¹⁹ In short, where Seneca largely indulged the young emperor,

¹⁶ Braund 2009, 32.

¹⁷ An in-depth analysis of the events and (historical) sources is provided in chapters 1-2 of Griffin 2000. See especially p. 60-1. Braund 2009, 11-6 features a brilliant overview of literary sources which deal with this early period.

¹⁸ Keitel 2010, 127-8

¹⁹ This was possibly part of Seneca and Burrus' strategy of satisfying the emperor through acceptable diversions (*Ann.* 13.2). See Ch. 2.3.

Agrippina's domineering and reproachful attitude towards Nero led to her alienation from her son.

The first challenge to the emperor's clemency seems to come with the murder of Britannicus. Britannicus had been an apparent threat to Nero's rule, and one the emperor was constantly reminded of. In 55 CE, Agrippina threatened Nero by supporting his stepbrother's claim to the throne, and during the Saturnalia of that same year, Britannicus performed a poem that alluded to his removal from the succession (*Ann.* 13.14-15). Both Tacitus (*Ann.* 13.16) and Suetonius (*Nero* 33) describe the poisoning of Britannicus at the emperor's dinner table, with Nero ascribing his brother's reaction to the poison as an epileptic fit. Agrippina's lack of awareness regarding the plot, as Keitel observes, mirrors the earlier murders to which Nero was not privy.²⁰

Ancient sources do not reveal the extent to which Seneca and Burrus were involved in the plot against Britannicus. As Braund highlights, it is not unlikely that many Romans bought into – publicly at the very least – the official narrative that Britannicus died from an epileptic episode rather than poison.²¹ In Tacitus' account of Seneca's suicide, however, he has Seneca comment that for Nero “after killing his mother and his brother, nothing else remained but to add the murder of his guardian and tutor” (*Ann.* 15.62), which implies that he was aware of the actual cause of Britannicus' demise. Whether Seneca was involved with the plot or merely informed after the fact is more difficult to deduce. Griffin notes that Julius Pollio, a praetorian tribune, played a crucial role in procuring the poison, which may suggest that Burrus was aware of the plot.²² If this was the case, then Seneca may have been privy to Nero's scheme owing to his partnership with Burrus. However, this hypothesis rests on circumstantial evidence, dependent on whether Julius Pollio divulged the details of the plot to Burrus.²³

As mentioned above, Tacitus often makes explicit reference to Seneca's intervention in Nero's politics, usually regarding a speech that Seneca composes; it is surprising, then, that in the aftermath of Britannicus' murder, no such mention is made. In fact,

²⁰ Keitel 2010, 128.

²¹ Braund 2009, 17.

²² Griffin 1992, 135.

²³ Suetonius does not mention this Julius Pollio, though he does attribute the poisonous concoction to the same Locusta; *Nero* 33.

Seneca's *De Clementia* fits the role that Tacitus fails to mention. Likely composed sometime in 56 CE, the treatise is easily understood as a response to the death of Britannicus.²⁴ The purpose of *De Clementia* is twofold: to reassure elite Romans of Nero's just rule while continuing to encourage the virtue of clemency in the emperor.

As Braund notes, it is evident from the beginning of *De Clementia* that Seneca's instruction here operates through praise.²⁵ Unlike other treatises that take a didactic tone and are fashioned as a response to a request,²⁶ Seneca undertakes to act as a mirror (*speculum*; *Clem.* 1.1) in order to put on display the *clementia* Nero already possesses. To reiterate, Seneca here is playing to two audiences. As an address to the emperor, *De Clementia* can be seen as a laudatory work; to Seneca's contemporaries, this is a work that puts the emperor's virtues on display to alleviate any anxieties in the wake of Britannicus' death. As a further objective, this treatise can be said to bring recognition to Seneca – and to some extent, Burrus – by showing that the emperor is surrounded by capable advisors.

Seneca's method of displaying Nero's clemency in *De Clementia* resembles the pardon of Plautius Lateranus as described earlier. The only evidence within the work of Nero's preference for *clementia* is a recount of him reluctantly signing the death warrant of a pair of brigands (*Clem.* 2.1.1-2).

What has most impelled me to write about clemency, Nero Caesar, is one specific remark of yours. [...] It was a noble remark demonstrating high-mindedness and great gentleness. [...] When your prefect Burrus, an outstanding man, born to serve you as emperor, was about to execute two brigands, he kept asking you to write down their names and the reason for their execution. [...] Both of you were equally reluctant and when he produced the document and handed it to you, you cried out: 'I wish I didn't know how to write!'

In both this story and the pardoning of Lateranus, Seneca is repeating and publicising an account of Nero's inclination towards clemency. It is worthy also to note the role of Burrus here, who is also reluctant to sentence the brigands. Seneca's publication of this story appears to have been successful and memorable, as Suetonius repeats it without changes (*Nero* 10).

²⁴ Braund 2009, 16-7.

²⁵ Braund 2009, 53-4.

²⁶ For example, Novatus requesting advice on managing anger in *De Ira*.

While Seneca played a crucial role in exonerating Nero of murder, it is unclear from *De Clementia* whether he approved of the emperor's actions. With regards to Seneca's political objectives in this treatise two plausible theories may help clarify the situation. Since Nero's involvement in the plot was dubious, Seneca may have been aiming to exculpate the emperor by promoting his *innocentia*. The laudatory nature of this work certainly supports this line of argument. Alternatively, if Seneca's aim was to excuse Nero for the murder of his stepbrother, then the assurances of a just rule governed by *clementia* may serve to divert the audience's attention.²⁷ In *De Clementia* 11.3-4 Seneca commends Nero on how his state is unstained by blood, and how the difference between a tyrant and a king (*rex*) is that tyrants take pleasure in venting anger (*saeviunt*), while kings only do so out of necessity. Seneca follows this assertion with a response from Nero (*Clem.* 1.12):

‘What do you mean? – Don't kings put people to death too?’ Yes, but only when that is recommended for the good of the state (*publica utilitas*).

There is much to unpack in this short exchange. Nero's invented objection questions whether the just ruler ever puts people to death. Here, Seneca portrays Nero with that youthful *innocentia* found throughout the treatise; the young Nero shown here is not even familiar enough with the conventions of punishment to be able to administer justified executions. This adds credence to the view that Nero could not have orchestrated Britannicus' death. Immediately after, Seneca clarifies that the ruler may be justified in putting a subject to death, if it is for the benefit of the state. We must wonder if Seneca is here alluding to Britannicus – was his death justified for the *publica utilitas*? Once again Seneca, it seems, was playing to two crowds: one that doubted the cause of Britannicus' death, and another that accepted it as a necessity of imperial politics. As Tacitus recounts Britannicus' funeral, he describes fratricide as “a crime that even many men could forgive, when they considered the ancient animosities between brothers, and the indivisibility of regal power”.²⁸ According to Braund, Tacitus here seems to highlight the “inevitable aspect of *Realpolitik*” that arose when there were strong contenders for the throne under the empire.²⁹ As Syme suggests, many senators who would later oppose Nero still held out hope that the early

²⁷ See Braund 2009, 17 and Griffin 1996, 170.

²⁸ An allusion, perhaps, to the Roman foundational myth of Romulus and Remus, a story of fratricide.

²⁹ Braund 2009, 17. The murder of Junius Silanus, as described above, can be seen as another example of this removal of political rivals. Silanus was a descendant of Augustus through his mother, Aemilia Lepida.

promises of *clementia* would persist following the initial, rough period of transition.³⁰ While Seneca's boast of a "state unstained by blood" (*civitatem incruentam, Clem.* 1.11.3) is demonstrably false, it seems that he was able to successfully protect Nero's image following Britannicus' demise.

2.2.2 The Death of Agrippina

While Nero got off scot-free with the plot against Britannicus, the fallout that ensued from the murder of Agrippina damaged his reputation of *clementia* beyond repair and confirmed the hostility of many elite Romans. Whereas the role of Seneca is somewhat obscured in the poisoning of Britannicus, Tacitus makes him one of the chief actors in the plot against Agrippina³¹ – though in real terms his input was ultimately of little consequence.

Hostilities between Nero and Agrippina continued to grow after the death of Britannicus. The threat to replace the emperor does not seem to have been taken lightly, and many of Nero's courtiers seem to play on the emperor's anxieties. Before the end of 55 CE, Agrippina had been put on trial due to a rumour brought before the emperor: it was alleged that Agrippina sought to place a distant member of the imperial family, Rubellius Plautus, on the throne (*Ann.* 13.19-20). Tacitus frames the accusation against Agrippina as untrue, concocted by one of her rivals. More important to note than the validity of the accusation, however, is the degree to which the charge weighed upon the emperor's mind.

Whether or not Agrippina ever planned to depose her son, Nero's reaction to the threat certainly attests to her political capabilities as *mater principis*. On two separate occasions, Tacitus refers to her reputation as the daughter of Germanicus, a mark which earns her renown, especially amongst the soldiery (Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.14 & 14.7). Moreover, she was in the graces of many elite Romans, and continued to reinforce these friendships following the death of Britannicus (Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.18). As Griffin rightly puts it, Agrippina is seen as a sort of 'kingmaker', capable of assisting any distant imperial family member to the throne.³²

³⁰ Syme 1958, vol. 2, 558.

³¹ For the purposes of this project, I focus here on Tacitus' recount of Agrippina's murder, as those of Suetonius and Dio fail to mention Seneca's involvement.

³² Griffin 1992, 78.

Both Seneca and Burrus were caught in this web of influence woven by Agrippina. In fact, both men owed their positions to her. For Burrus, this fact would lead to his eventual downfall when Nero became suspicious of his loyalties (*Ann.* 13.20). This opened the door for various accusers to concoct rumours about Burrus' loyalties, and his position was only saved due to Seneca's influence (*Ann.* 13.20-3). The pair had an opportunity to support Nero in removing Agrippina following the death of Britannicus, but they instead conspired to get her a fair trial which led to her acquittal. Although they would later support Nero in removing his mother, Seneca and Burrus seem to dissuade Nero from matricide during this time. Scholars have formulated several reasons why this might be the case: as Rudich suspects, the advisors wanted her removed from the political scene, but feared that the damage to the "dynasty's public image" would be too great.³³ Certainly we might imagine that a crime of such proportions so soon after the death of the emperor's stepson would have caused great controversy. Griffin puts forward the interesting view that Agrippina functioned as a check against the emperor's unrestricted power: while Agrippina lived, Nero turned to Seneca and Burrus for help in managing the influence of his mother. Therefore, "it was in their interest to keep Agrippina alive, for Nero would only heed them while he saw them as a refuge from his mother."³⁴

By the March of 59 CE, Nero had again been persuaded to commit matricide. Tacitus makes Poppaea Sabina, now the mistress of Nero, the chief instigator (*Ann.* 14.1). On her suggestion, Agrippina would need to be out of the picture before Nero could divorce Octavia and marry her. Tacitus ends this section with the interesting claim that "everybody wanted to see the mother's power destroyed, and none thought the son's hatred would harden to the point of his murdering her" (*cupientibus cunctis infringi potentiam matris et credente nullo usque ad caedem eius duratura filii odia*, *Ann.* 14.1). Tacitus here seems to be referring to Nero's inner court, which included Seneca. The aim of the court here – to disempower Agrippina, rather than kill her – is certainly in line with how both Rudich and Griffin describe Seneca's *modus operandi*.

An attempt to assassinate Agrippina was made at Baiae, where her private barge was modified in such a way that it would collapse at a convenient time so that the murder would look like an accident (*Ann.* 14.3-5). After Agrippina escaped and retreated to her villa, Tacitus portrays Nero in a petrified state, unsure of how to continue and

³³ Rudich 1997, 71.

³⁴ Griffin 1992, 78-9.

fearing retaliation from his mother (*Ann.* 14.7). Once again, he entrusts his wellbeing to his advisors, summoning Seneca and Burrus to resolve the matter.³⁵ Tacitus is unsure as to whether they were already privy to the plot.

Several things are worthy of note in the ensuing conversation reported by Tacitus. The first striking thing is the suggestion of the advisors' complicity in Nero's plot. They raise no objection to the emperor's plan to kill his mother, nor do they attempt to dissuade him. This is markedly different from their previous strategy – keeping power out of Agrippina's reach. It is possible they thought that the plan had, at that stage, progressed too far to be called off — an earlier attempt had already been made on Agrippina's life, and she doubtless knew who had instigated it. If this was the case, they may have supported the removal of Agrippina lest she retaliate. Another noteworthy aspect of this episode is the failure of the advisors to meaningfully assist Nero. According to Burrus, the *praetoriae* would not renege on their oaths to the house of the Caesars, and still regarded Agrippina highly as the daughter of Germanicus (*Ann.* 14.7). Griffin cites this failure as a significant blow against the pair's influence over the emperor, noting Nero's bitterness when, after the task of ending Agrippina was taken up by Anicetus, the emperor proclaimed that he was given an empire by his freedman (*Ann.* 14.7).³⁶ The sentiment highlights his displeasure towards his chief advisors, who were not able to muster the power to do what a freedman could.

Following the death of Agrippina, Seneca engaged in a dire publicity campaign to save the emperor's reputation from being branded a matricide – ironic given the earlier criticisms of Claudius being too harsh in his judgement of parricides. Seneca's decision to help protect Nero's reputation reflects the tensions that are present in the philosopher jeopardising his moral teachings in favour of service to a tyrant.³⁷ Whereas the murder of Britannicus was excusable, Seneca would find the task of exculpating the emperor of this crime far too great a task, one that ultimately tarnished his own reputation. A letter was sent to the senate, authored by Seneca, which detailed the

³⁵ With regards to the earlier footnote explaining my decision to focus on Tacitus' recount, this is where our sources diverge. In Dio's account, Nero resolves the complication on his own initiative and the involvement of Seneca and Burrus is not mentioned (Cassius Dio, 62.13.4). Suetonius (Nero 34) is characteristically brief on this episode, perhaps neglecting to mention the role of the advisors in favour of focusing on Nero's wickedness. See further Keitel 2010, 130 for a detailed comparison of the agency of Nero and Agrippina between the various sources.

³⁶ Griffin 1992, 79.

³⁷ As an example, Rudich 1997, 96.

official version of events³⁸: Agrippina, who had wanted to usurp the emperor's power for some time, survived an accidental shipwreck and had afterward sent her freedman to assassinate Nero. The explanation, as Tacitus explains, was beyond ludicrous, and Seneca had admitted his own guilt by writing the letter (*Ann.* 14.11).

According to Rudich, many of the Campanian towns offered congratulations to Nero and celebrated his safety, while in Rome senators were left to ponder the oddities of the story: how likely was it that the scheming Agrippina would entrust a single man to assassinate her son, the emperor (*Ann.* 14.10-1)?³⁹ Despite any private reservations these senators had towards Nero's conduct, the senate voted congratulations to Nero for exposing the plot, setting up annual games and statues to memorialise the occasion, and welcoming Nero's return to the city with a procession resembling a triumph.⁴⁰ Tacitus' account illustrates the tension when he compares the glaring crime with the overenthusiastic welcome of the emperor (*Ann.* 14.12-3). Quintilian recalls the wary congratulations of the Gallic orator Julius Africanus: "Caesar, your provinces of Gaul entreat you to bear your good fortune with courage" (Quintilian, 8.5.15). Here, Africanus skilfully balances his salutation with a tinge of consolation, while there is also a hint of dissimulation in the way senators congratulate Nero for committing a heinous crime.

The notable secession of Thrasea Paetus, who removed himself from the senate while others heaped praises onto the emperor, is the exception that proves the rule of dissimulation. According to Tacitus, Thrasea's withdrawal here was ill-advised and only served to draw danger to himself (*Ann.* 14.12) – a more successful subversion of the emperor's authority was yet to come. However, Thrasea's withdrawal can be seen as evidence of wider disapproval towards the emperor's behaviour.

2.2.3 The Resurgence of the *Maiestas* Trials

The death of Agrippina exposed the cracks in Nero's public image. For the following three years, Seneca and Burrus continued their joint influence, but Nero had increasingly surrounded himself with courtiers who encouraged his indulgent activities as well as his independence and opposition to his ministers. The political effects of

³⁸ It is Quintilian (8.5.18) who confirms that Seneca penned the letter to the senate on Nero's behalf.

³⁹ Rudich 1993, 37.

⁴⁰ Champlin 2003, 219-21 for the discussion of Nero's return and its triumphal imagery.

these activities will be analysed below (Ch. 2.3); here, it is sufficient to note the rise of Ofonius Tigellinus, who was *praefectus vigilum* and naturally had his eyes on Burrus' office as prefect of the guard.⁴¹

The turbulent year of 62 CE solidified Nero's drift towards tyranny. The year opened with the trial of Antistius Sosianus, accused of authoring and reciting poetry abusive to the emperor. The trial was monumental as the first charge of *maiestas* under Nero's reign, although Tacitus claims that it was a ploy orchestrated by the emperor to bring renown to himself (*Ann.* 14.48). The senate would find Antistius guilty and sentence him to death, but not before Nero would step in to deliver an eleventh-hour veto, commuting the sentence to exile and displaying his *clementia* for all to see.

Whether Seneca had any hand in this ploy, or whether he was aware of it at all, is unknown. It goes without saying that the theatrical show of *clementia* planned here is not what he had in mind when writing his treatise. Tigellinus may have had some hand in this plot as it was his son-in-law Cossutianus Capito who prosecuted Antistius.⁴²

The senate, as expected, endorsed the prosecution. Only Thrasea spoke in support of commuting the sentence, practising an ingenious form of *dissimulatio* where he praised the current *princeps* and the merciful times they lived in (*Ann.* 14.48). He argued that, given Nero's *clementia*, Antistius should be punished in a manner that would not sully the times in which they lived.⁴³ Due to Thrasea's outspokenness, the senate deferred the matter to Nero, who was begrudgingly forced to abandon the ploy. In Tacitus' words, "Thrasea's outspokenness broke the others' [senators] servility" (*Ann.* 14.49). By promoting *clementia*, Thrasea had appropriated the use of that virtue away from Nero.⁴⁴ This episode marked several changes for the rest of the regime. For one, Thrasea had exposed the fickleness of Nero's *clementia*. However, elite Romans now

⁴¹ The *praefectus vigilum* who preceded Tigellinus was likely Seneca's client Annaeus Serenus, who died during his tenure (*Ep.* 63.14). We might wonder if Seneca had intended Burrus' successor to be an ally of his, to continue the partnership that kept the emperor relatively in check. As Tacitus says (*Annals* 13.2), cooperation between those in power, such as that of Seneca and Burrus, was a rarity.

⁴² Keeping in mind that *delatores* were entitled to a quarter of the accused's wealth if the prosecution was successful. See Wilson 2015, 143; Osgood 2017, 36-7.

⁴³ Referring to the "sordid history" of *maiestas* trials, as Strunk 2010, 126 describes it. Strunk also highlights that Pliny (*Ep.* 6.29) attests that Thrasea often took cases which would establish a precedent, as this one would. This implies that he was wary of the long-lasting effects this case would have on the Neronian judicial system, and sought to curtail the issue before it took hold.

⁴⁴ Osgood 2017, 41.

knew that speaking openly was dangerous, with many opportunistic courtiers ready to misconstrue one's words for personal gain by abusing the *lex maiestatis*.

For Seneca, this increasing political pressure would have been troublesome. Treatises of the *De Clementia* variety, which addressed Nero in a frank manner, could be misconstrued by a skilful *delator*. With the death of Burrus in 62 CE, Tacitus tells us that Seneca's influence was shattered, forcing him into political withdrawal (Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.51-2). In the span of eight years, Seneca's promising young pupil had adopted the worst habits of tyranny. While Seneca had begun by rearing Nero and managing his vices, his role eventually became one concerned with public relations, in which he was required to uphold the image of *clementia* he had previously advocated.

2.3 Nero's Relations with the Senatorial Class

In parallel with Nero's drift towards less clement rule, a tense and complex situation emerged regarding the emperor's relations with the Roman elite. While Nero advocated the idea of senatorial independence, the imperial system of governance never deprived the *princeps* of power. Concurrently, Nero increasingly involved elite Romans in public theatrical events he organised; on this stage, he was able to exercise a degree of social and cultural control, as will be explained in due course. First, however, we should examine the emperor's relationship to the governing senatorial body.

At the beginning of Nero's reign, relations between the emperor and senate had been marred by the turbulent years under Gaius and Claudius. Nero's first task after his accession was to repair this vital, co-dependent partnership for the empire's successful functioning.⁴⁵ To this end, he endeavoured to reinvent the nature of the emperor-senate relationship by distancing himself from the senate's activities. In his initial address to the senate, a speech ghost-written by Seneca, Nero assured the senatorial body that it would rule over state affairs – Italy and the senatorial provinces – independently and without interference from the *princeps* (Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.4). As Griffin observes, Nero's promises of senatorial liberty and clemency, alongside the renunciation of the previous regime, was not novel but rather expected of a new *princeps*; what was surprising, even to Tacitus (*Annals* 13.5), was that Nero kept his word on this matter

⁴⁵ The nature of the emperor-senate relationship is well outlined in Osgood 2017, 34.

– at least for a time.⁴⁶ With its newfound freedom the senate reinstated the *lex Cincia*, a law that forbade lawyers to accept fees or gifts for defending a case; the reinstatement of this lapsed law was a clear denunciation of Claudius’ influence over senatorial trials. Nero had satisfied the senators who were grateful to secure once again a degree of autonomy.

At first glance, these early stages of Nero’s reign appear to be a boon for the senate. As Roller convincingly outlines, the imperial senate possessed privileges that its republican counterpart lacked: the ability to elect its lower-ranking magistrates, the power to create laws through senatorial decrees (*senatus consultum*), and again, the freedom to regulate its membership through treason (*maiestas*) and extortion (*repetundae*) trials.⁴⁷ Considering Nero was the youngest emperor yet at just seventeen years of age and was still being educated by advisors, one might expect the balance of power to shift towards the senate during this early period. However, the realities of the principate system of government paint a very different picture. Despite making true on his promise of senatorial independence, the emperor’s influence constantly shaped senatorial proceedings. As Roller rightly argues, the very existence of the emperor as a greater locus of authority and power meant that the senate could never operate with any level of true independence.⁴⁸ The most apparent evidence of the emperor’s continued influence was the ability to elevate senators to higher magistracies – including the much-coveted consulship – through imperial commendation. Several scholars have speculated that this system of commendation would have caused many senators to say what the emperor would want to hear in senatorial meetings. Furthermore, those elevated to higher magistracies would have had a sense of obligation towards the emperor in return for the honours bestowed upon them.⁴⁹ The emperor’s ever-present influence is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by Tacitus when he recounts a meeting of the senate discussing the misconduct of freedmen (*Ann.* 13.26-7): the senators petitioned for some form of recourse against freedmen who disrespected or abused their patrons. Though the senate largely seemed to support the legislation, the consuls were reluctant to put it to motion without first consulting the emperor. After Nero deliberated with his advisors, he gave written instruction to the

⁴⁶ Griffin 2000, 51-2.

⁴⁷ Roller 2015, 16-7.

⁴⁸ Roller 2015, 17-8.

⁴⁹ Roller 2015, 17; Osgood 2017, 36.

senate to deal with cases on an individual basis. This case shows that despite overwhelming support in the senate for the legislation, it was ultimately overturned after the emperor did not endorse it.

In addition to the ever-present influence of the emperor over senatorial proceedings, Osgood has recently highlighted how the emperor engaged and endeared himself to Roman elites through cultural means.⁵⁰ Theatricality, aestheticism, and decadence feature as landmarks of Nero's reign in both Tacitus' and Suetonius' accounts.

From a young age, Nero exhibited a liking for theatricality and performance. Music and equestrianism are counted amongst his most distracting pastimes by ancient sources (Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.3.3; Suetonius, *Nero* 20-22). From around 54 CE, Seneca and Burrus discouraged this penchant for performance, attempting instead to divert the young emperor's attention to more 'acceptable pleasures' (*voluptatibus concessis*, *Ann.* 13.3.2).

Suetonius' account focuses heavily on the performative aspects of the emperor on stage; in the sections describing his singing and chariot racing, it is the public nature of these activities that is repeatedly emphasised (*Nero* 20-25). Crowds of all social strata reportedly encouraged and applauded the emperor's performances. In turn, flatterers were generously rewarded for their feedback: the group leaders of *cliques* – consisting of *equites*, commoners, and foreigners – were awarded with the handsome sum of four hundred thousand sesterces (*Nero* 20); the province of the Achaeans, a people who properly welcomed and congratulated Nero's performances, was granted governmental autonomy and was exempted from paying taxes (*Nero* 24); many elite Romans were persuaded by financial means to join the emperor on stage or perform in the arena, though according to Tacitus, coming from the emperor, this was more of an order than a request (*Ann.* 14.14). If Suetonius is to be believed, as many as four hundred senators and six hundred *equites* performed in gladiatorial games (*Nero* 12).

Of course, actors and other performers occupied a low position in Rome's social hierarchy, and it was unbecoming of elite Romans – much less the *princeps* – to occupy such roles. Under Augustus, a senatorial decree forbade elite Romans to perform in the theatre or gladiatorial shows (Suet. *Aug.* 43). Tacitus, to avoid shaming those Romans whose ancestors participated in Nero's festivals, chooses to omit their names

⁵⁰ Osgood 2017.

from his history (*Ann.* 14.14). Yet, despite the prohibited nature of these performances, there was no shortage of elite Romans who participated in them. Some were undeniably obligated to do so by the emperor, such as the distinguished Romans who attempted to hide their face and “envied the dead” (Dio, 61.19).⁵¹ Others, however, were more than willing to engage with the emperor through his medium of choice. For some, artistic recognition from the emperor could lead to the advancement of one’s political career. This was certainly true of numerous literary types in Nero’s circle, including Lucan, Petronius, and the future emperor Nerva, to name a few.

For other high-ranking Romans, especially those who were in opposition to Nero’s government, their motives for performing on stage merit further examination. Why did the senators Piso and Thrasea Paetus, two of Nero’s most influential political opponents, partake in an activity that was both self-demeaning and unlikely to win them the favour with the emperor? Tacitus casts shame on those Romans who partook in Nero’s theatrical shows but offers no comments regarding a vocal performance of Thrasea, given in the garb of a tragic character (*Ann.* 16.21).⁵² Thrasea’s performance may have been a calculated snub against the emperor. The event is listed amongst Nero’s various gripes with Thrasea; in this case, Thrasea had been largely unenthusiastic about performances at the Juvenalian games, but was happy enough to take the stage in a separate festival in his home of Patavium. Dio adds that Thrasea had also failed to attend the emperor’s performances, in addition to not making sacrifices to Nero’s divine voice as other senators had (Dio, 42.26). Tacitus reports a similar charge brought against Seneca, when detractors who were close to Nero tried to make him turn against his tutor by convincing him that Seneca sought to outdo his theatrical achievements. Among the allegations, Nero was told that Seneca ridiculed the emperor’s ability to drive chariots and sing and began composing poetry more frequently once the emperor developed a passion for doing so (*Ann.* 14.52). Though it is unlikely that Seneca’s own poetic pursuits were intended to challenge Nero’s, the allegations suggest that the emperor’s passion for the arts had political implications. Offences against the emperor, whether real or merely perceived, transcended that culture of artistry and were retaliated against via political and legal means.

⁵¹ Littlewood 2015, 164.

⁵² Tacitus does, however, present this as the opinion of Subrius Flavus who thought Piso was just as disgraceful as Nero for performing in tragic costume; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.65.

As Rimell puts it, it was under Nero that a new style of imperial government developed – one that was characterised by the “inseparability of artistic and political charisma in imperial court life”.⁵³ More than the whims of a young and inexperienced emperor, Nero’s performances were an exercise of the princeps’ position, influence, and power.⁵⁴ As Tacitus reports, Nero created divine and regnal precedents for these activities, citing chariot-driving kings and the cithara-playing image of Apollo (*Ann.* 14.14). More than a justification for these activities, Nero’s performances are seen in a new light: a grandiose emperor who exercises power through displays of extravagance. Through this marriage of political imagery and performance, the emperor continued to exert a vast amount of influence over elite Romans. Though Tacitus attempts to heap shame on these activities, the historian cannot deny the large numbers of elite Romans who also participated in this novel form of state culture. Epictetus, a contemporary figure writing after the reign of Nero, describes a scene between two Stoic senators, Paconius Agrippinus and Florus, who are debating whether to attend one of Nero’s festivals (Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.2.12):

When Florus was considering whether he should attend Nero’s show to perform some part in it himself, Agrippinus said to him, ‘Go!’; and when Florus asked him, ‘Then why aren’t you going yourself?’, he replied, ‘Because I’ve never even considered it.’ For as soon as anyone begins to consider such questions, assessing and comparing the values of external things, he comes near to being one of those people who have lost all sense of their proper character. What are you asking me, then? ‘Is death or life to be regarded as preferable?’ I answer: Life. ‘Pain or Pleasure?’ I answer: Pleasure. ‘But if I don’t agree to play a role in the tragedy, I’ll lose my head.’ Go and play that role then, but I won’t play one. ‘Why?’ Because you regard yourself as being just one thread among all the threads in the tunic. ‘So what follows?’ You should consider how you can be like other people, just as one thread doesn’t want to be marked out from all the other threads. But for my part, I want to be the purple, the small gleaming band that makes all the rest appear splendid and beautiful. Why do you tell me, then, to ‘be like everything else’? In that case, how shall I still be the purple?

⁵³ Rimell 2015, 122.

⁵⁴ Littlewood 2015, 164-5.

Florus is persuaded to attend for fear of death, while Agrippinus is strongly opposed as it would debase his character.⁵⁵ The scene is evocative of the moral dilemma numerous senators surely faced when considering whether to indulge the emperor's theatrical antics. However, for every Agrippinus or Thrasea who stubbornly refused to partake, numerous others did not have the same reservations. As Osgood rightly suggests, those who wanted to remain in the emperor's graces and be rewarded through financial or political gain, would have to play along; sycophancy (*adulatio*) was the price of admission.⁵⁶

2.4 Conclusions

This chapter has explored the tumultuous events in Nero's reign that preceded the writing of the *Epistulae Morales*. While Seneca wielded considerable influence in Nero's court, he was ultimately unable to cultivate the ideal ruler he imagined the young *princeps* would grow into. The virtuous ideal of *clementia* played a key role in Nero's public image from the beginning of his reign; as the victims of the emperor began to grow in number, however, *clementia* became little more than a triteness, repeated when it was required to exculpate the emperor from charges of murder. Following Burrus's death in 62 CE, Seneca's position in the court of Nero was fraught. Though the early period of Nero's rule promised an emperor reared by philosophical tutelage, Tacitus informs us that this reality quickly crumbled and devolved into murder and profligacy. While this chapter has not listed every crime committed by the emperor,⁵⁷ the close readings of early Senecan treatises has covered numerous aspects of Nero's reign that Seneca was close in proximity to and has provided a broad picture of the emperor's decline into tyranny.

According to Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.56), Seneca unofficially withdrew from the political scene of Rome and began writing the *Epistulae Morales*. Without political power, Seneca had no means by which to communicate ideas, aside from literary works. As shown in Chapter 2.2.3, the revival of *maiestas* trials meant that Roman writers had to exercise greater caution so as not to be perceived as denouncing the emperor in their

⁵⁵ Bartsch 2017, 161-2.

⁵⁶ Osgood 2017, 46.

⁵⁷ For example, I have not mentioned the persecution of the Christians (*Ann.* 15.44), an act that perturbed many Romans.

writing. If Seneca was to communicate criticism of the emperor, it would have to be in a measured and covert manner. As concluded in Chapter 1, the epistolary genre offered a mode of communication which would appear private on the surface, perfect for delivering his moral messages and judgements of Nero's regime.

The insight into Seneca's political ideology discussed in this chapter provides clues as to which aspects of Nero's rule he might choose to critique in the *Epistulae Morales*. The shortcomings Seneca finds in Nero's predecessors inform us of the sort of behaviour he wants to discourage in a ruler. As observed, certain destructive vices like anger (*ira*) and cruelty (*crudelitas*) come to be directly associated with tyranny. Another aspect that may constitute a critique are the references to events associated with Nero's cruelty or extravagance. With regards to cruelty, the murder of imperial family members would certainly mark an emperor as a tyrant, as was the case in the *Apocolocyntosis*. With regards to Nero's extravagance, one might expect Seneca to denounce those Neronian activities which were particularly self-indulgent (*luxuria*) and immoral.

CHAPTER 3

Veiled Criticism in the *Epistulae Morales*

Introduction

So far, the first chapter of this thesis has established that Seneca circulated and shared his letters amongst Rome's senatorial class, many of whom were within the emperor's inner circle. The second chapter showed the various points of political contention under Nero's reign, including the division of power between the emperor and the senate, the emperor's decadence, and the increasingly fraying image of his *clementia*. Seneca attempted to shape Nero into a virtuous ruler and continued to do so even when the latter began to exhibit signs of tyrannical behaviour. However, after the death of Burrus shattered his power, Seneca was forced to retreat from politics. It was in this climate that the *Epistulae Morales* were written.

This chapter turns to one of the great mysteries in the field of Senecan scholarship. Considering the state of political turmoil Seneca is trying to escape and considering the autobiographical elements of the *Letters*, it is remarkable that there is no mention of any of Seneca's contemporaries throughout the entire work.¹ Moreover, references to the city of Rome, events described by Tacitus or Suetonius, or even mentions of the emperor himself are conspicuously absent. According to Wilson, this omission is not an oversight: "it is worth pointing out that [Seneca] does not just quietly omit political content from the epistles, but he parades that omission".² To support this view, Wilson points to Seneca's commentary in *Ep.* 118.2:

I can never lack for something to write, even setting aside all the stuff that fills Cicero's letters, like what candidate is in difficulties; who is campaigning on borrowed means and who is using his own; who has Caesar's support for the consulship, or Pompey's, or that of his own money box [...]. Instead of treating other people's problems, it is better to address one's own.

¹ Wilson 2015, 138; Veyne 2003, 160-2; Edwards 2017, 166.

² Wilson 2015, 139.

Here, Seneca unmistakably refers to this all-too-obvious omission from his letters; he is well aware that the reader expects political commentary.

The objective of this chapter is to examine the ways in which Seneca criticises Nero, his circle, and the cultural practices of his reign.³ Despite Seneca's claim to apoliticism, many passages throughout the letters seem to refer to the Neronian milieu. I propose to explore the hypothesis that references to the emperor are made through the content which Seneca shares in these letters. As modern readers, we are somewhat disadvantaged in this sort of close reading, as ancient readers of Seneca's letters would have been much more attuned to the allusions contained in this work. Nonetheless, as Edwards points out, "Nero's shadowy presence may intermittently be sensed in this work",⁴ especially in Seneca's repeated discussions of the proper relations between rulers and their subjects. According to Habinek, Seneca is engaged in a "double game" where he criticises the emperor's tyrannical actions while maintaining the outward appearance of an apolitical, philosophical retiree.⁵ Now that we are sufficiently familiar with the political tensions of this time, as established in Chapter 2, we can begin to reconstruct the way that specific Senecan passages would have resonated with his aristocratic Roman audience as critical of the Neronian age.

3.1 Techniques of Criticism

Safe criticism requires special skills.⁶ Keeping in mind that Seneca would have had to exercise a degree of caution and self-censorship, it is worth asking what sort of techniques he used to expound said criticism. In this section, I argue that passages in which Seneca critiques the emperor employ one or more of the following techniques: allusion, omission, or contrast.

An allusion is one of the more direct ways in which criticism is communicated. These are references, usually in passages where a place, event, or activity is described, which bears some relationship to the emperor. The mere mention of this reference will inevitably call to a reader's mind a well-known connection to Nero; references to

³ Of course, attacks on the moral failings of the rhetorician's age are a common *topos* in ancient rhetoric (Habinek 2005, 48-9, 105).

⁴ Edwards 2017, 166.

⁵ Habinek 2014, 14.

⁶ As argued in Ahl's (1984, 174-5, 208-8) article.

theatre, for example, might be read as an allusion to the emperor's thespian interests. A few preliminary assumptions might be made about Seneca's choice of allusions: for one, we might expect them to be well known by his aristocratic audience and probably refer to something that occurred in the public sphere. Furthermore, the allusion would need to have some negative association for it to be seen as a criticism of the emperor.

Omission, the second technique, is one of the more challenging techniques to detect, given that the evidence for it is the very absence of explicit evidence. As already mentioned, the lack of contemporary politics in the *Epistulae Morales* is by itself a notable omission that cannot be accidental.⁷ When assessing this technique, it is usually in reference to a topic or comparison that is painfully obvious but is surprisingly absent from Seneca's discussion. As will be shown shortly, one of the most prominent and commonly cited oddities in the *Epistulae Morales*, the absence of any mention of the Great Fire of Rome, is such an example of an unexpected omission. The purpose of the omission is somewhat different to the allusion: whereas an allusion indirectly draws the reader's attention to one of the emperor's wrongdoings, an omission passes on this opportunity where the opportunity to do so is glaringly obvious. In part, this may be for reasons of self-censorship. However, the opportunity for the reader to draw comparisons with Nero's behaviour or circumstances should naturally follow. This form of omission bears some similarities to the rhetorical technique of *praeteritio*: by excluding an element from the discussion, the speaker draws attention to it.

The third of these techniques – contrast – bears some similarity to allusion. In both cases, a shortcoming is identified. However, whereas allusion serves to remind the reader of said shortcoming, Seneca deploys contrast to set that vice against an opposing virtue. This technique serves to highlight the immorality of that vice even further. The two things which are contrasted against each other vary in materiality; often, it concerns philosophical ideas, such as virtues and vices. At other times, it concerns political concepts, such as the tyrant and ruler. Finally, at times it is lifestyle choices with material implications, as is the case in discussions of asceticism.

When taken individually, passages that seem to bear some relevance to the political context in which Seneca was writing can seem like outliers. However, by highlighting the repeated use of these techniques throughout the collection, sections that seem to

⁷ Discussed in the introduction of this thesis.

criticise Nero and his reign become more deliberate. As a result, a bigger picture emerges, and the subversive nature of the collection becomes more pronounced.

3.2 The Omission of The Great Fire of Rome

I begin my reading of veiled criticism in the *Epistulae Morales* with an example where the brazenness of Seneca's omission is remarkable. In *Ep.* 91, a mutual friend of Seneca and Lucilius is grieving for his hometown of Lugdunum (Lyon), which was destroyed by a devastating fire in the summer of 64 CE.⁸ Seneca begins by emphasising this fire's immensity, stating that no fire has ever been so great as to level a town completely (*Ep.* 91.1). The obvious omission from this letter – significant for any elite Roman – is any mention of the Great Fire of Rome, which devastated the city in July of 64 CE. The fire in Rome, which over six days and seven nights destroyed numerous houses, apartments and temples, is reported to have destroyed ten of the city's fourteen districts (*Ann.* 15.39-41; Suetonius, *Nero* 38). While fires in Rome's dense city were common enough, the devastation caused by the July fire was surely similar and recent enough to compare to the one that levelled Lugdunum.⁹

Seneca has reason to omit mention of the Great Fire, owing to a rumour about Nero's culpability in the event. In opening his episode on the fire, Tacitus explains that it is uncertain whether the fire was an accident or started by order of the *princeps* (*forte an dolo principis incertum*; *Ann.* 15.38) and that his sources have attested to both possibilities. Before even describing the disaster, Tacitus has relayed that it was commonly believed that Nero orchestrated the fire, even though the emperor was outside of the city at Antium when it began (*Ann.* 15.39). Suetonius does not even entertain this shadow of a doubt, claiming Nero was the arsonist himself (*Nero* 38).

⁸ There are some complications as to the dating of the fire at Lugdunum. Tacitus (*Ann.* 16.13) reports that in 66 CE, Nero paid four million sesterces for the rebuilding of the town, matching the donation Lugdunum had made for disaster relief following the Great Fire of Rome. It is not for certain that the disaster (*cladem*) is the same fire described by Seneca in *Ep.* 91, though it is highly likely. The sequence of events implies that Lugdunum experienced its own fire merely months after the one that devastated Rome, with Nero sending relief funds years after. A further complication arises in the fact that Seneca claims Lugdunum has burned down a century after it was built (*Ep.* 91.14). According to Dio (46.50), Lugdunum was founded in 43 BC, leaving some (erroneously) to date the fire of Lugdunum to 57/8 CE. The tone of *Ep.* 91 makes it clear that the fire was a recent occurrence, leading me to believe that his comment reflects an oversight or merely the use of artistic license on behalf of Seneca.

⁹ Edwards 2017, 166; Veyne 2003, 163.

As with the murder of Britannicus,¹⁰ it is less important for us to know whether Nero was behind the fire or not, and more significant to note that numerous elite Romans privately suspected the emperor of the crime. Tacitus quotes Subrius Flavus, a Praetorian tribune speaking up in the fallout of the Pisonian conspiracy: it was Nero's behaviour as a "murderer [...], charioteer, actor, and arsonist" (*parricida [matris et uxoris], auriga et histrio et incendiarius*; *Ann.* 15.67) that had earned him the contempt of the military. As Osgood observes, the blunt and vigorous (*incomptos et validos*) sentiments of this officer represent the reservations privately held by many senators.¹¹ In summary, for Seneca, any mention of the Great Fire would have inevitably drawn the reader's mind back to the rumours attributing the cause of the fire to Nero.

Once we reach *Ep.* 91.3, Seneca's 'oversight' is notable. As the letter continues, the omission of Rome's Great Fire becomes even more glaring. Seneca's philosophical instruction in this letter revolves around adopting a typically Stoic attitude towards changing fortunes. The mental fortitude required to deal with a natural disaster can be attained through the practice of premeditation: Seneca's recommendation for avoiding unexpected circumstances is to expect those very misfortunes (*Ep.* 91.4). To demonstrate his point, Seneca cites a myriad of examples where the fortunes of an individual or a community have been suddenly upended. In applying his tenets to real-world examples, he lists several geographical locations affected by natural disasters (*Ep.* 91.9):

How often have cities of Asia and Greece been levelled by a single earthquake!
How many towns in Syria and Macedonia have been swallowed up! How often
has this disaster devastated Cyprus! How often has Paphos collapsed onto itself!
We have frequently had news that entire cities have been destroyed, and we are
only a tiny fraction of the people who frequently hear about them.

The observant reader will once again notice that the still-smouldering city of Rome is absent from this list. Seneca opts to include only faraway locations in his examples. By the halfway mark of the letter, Seneca has passed up on two opportunities to include the city of Rome. The proof that the omission is deliberate becomes clear shortly after,

¹⁰ See Chapter 2.2.1.

¹¹ Osgood 2017, 42.

at *Ep.* 91.13-14, where Seneca finally mentions Rome's history.¹² On the subject of rebuilding a city after its destruction, Seneca paraphrases the Augustan-era Greek historian Timagenes who – inimical to the city – grieved whenever Rome was aflame as he knew the restored buildings would be superior to the ones destroyed. With this comment, Seneca all but confirms that he intended to omit any mention of the recent fire; just months after the July fire he is here referring to fires in the city of Rome, but is unable to discuss the latter event for fear of repercussions.¹³ Whether intentional or otherwise, any mention of the emperor in a negative light risked drawing the attention of the *delatores*, as was the case in the trial against Antistius Sosianus.¹⁴

3.3 Omission of Praise

While *Ep.* 91 demonstrates how Seneca omits discussion of a topic that draws attention to the emperor's negative reputation, in this section, I describe a different type of omission, in which Seneca explicitly foregoes praising Nero, even though the opportunity arises. Whereas in the case of the Great Fire, non-inclusion is used to exonerate the author of dissidence, here the omission serves to criticise the emperor through withholding praise.

These examples make it highly plausible for these sorts of omissions also to occur in letters in which Seneca discusses the relationship between ruler and subjects. *Ep.* 73 is an interesting case where Seneca – at a cursory glance – seems more than content with the current state of Nero's Rome. On closer inspection, the letter engages in double-speak to such an extent that its true message becomes hidden between the lines.¹⁵

Beginning the letter, Seneca dives headlong into its purpose (*Ep.* 73.1):

¹² This is one of two mentions of the city in this letter, the second being at 91.16 where Seneca briefly points out that both Rome and Ardea were sacked in the past, as he wants to demonstrate that both greater and lesser cities can be subjected to that fate.

¹³ One may be tempted to read some sort of allusion here in the way Seneca discusses the rebuilding of the city. This might foreshadow the construction of the *Domus Aurea*, though it is unclear if that construction had begun. Even so, someone as well connected as Seneca would surely have had some idea of its plans, even if the domicile was still in its early stages.

¹⁴ See Chapter 2.2.3

¹⁵ See also Veyne (2003, 160-3) who reads *Ep.* 73 as an “open letter intended for Nero”.

People are wrong, I believe, when they suppose that devoted philosophers are headstrong and difficult to manage, having little regard for magistrates or kings (*regum*) or for anyone who governs the state (*eorumve per quos publica administrantur*). Quite the contrary: no one is more grateful to them, and with good reason, since no one benefits more from their administration than those who are enabled by it to enjoy the advantages of tranquil leisure.

The theme of private, leisurely philosophy follows on from *Ep.* 72.3-5. There, Seneca established that philosophy is a full-time pursuit that the individual must give himself over to entirely, not merely as a hobby. Now, Seneca endeavours to dispel the rumours that private philosophers are inimical to the state and those who govern it. As in the passage quoted above, he begins with the claim that philosophers are, in fact, the *most* indebted to rulers for the *otium* they are free to enjoy.¹⁶ Developing the argument further, Seneca compares the grateful philosopher to those public servants who, although equally indebted to the ruler, instead practice ingratitude due to their ambition (*Ep.* 73.2-4).

We should note that Seneca opts to use *rex* rather than *princeps* in the letter's opening – a technique he also used throughout *De Clementia*.¹⁷ However, while *De Clementia* uses the two terms interchangeably, the more nuanced *princeps* is absent in this letter. The use of *rex* serves to distance the discussion within the letter from Seneca's immediate situation; the discussion becomes more abstract and idealistic, discussing a theoretical, ideal state rather than Nero's Rome – or so it would seem.

This letter's provocative nature has proven tantalising to several Senecan scholars who have also read it in the context of its contemporaneous political circumstances. To both Rudich and Edwards, Seneca seems to be employing irony when he writes that a philosopher should be grateful to his benevolent ruler in the same manner as a man

¹⁶ Wilson 2015, 147.

¹⁷ See Trapp 2007, 177-8. In addition to the use of this phrase, the letter seems to feature themes that would not be out of place in *De Clementia*. For example, Seneca's conception of the relationship between ruler and ruled is symbiotic: the natural relationship between the two parties suggests that the ruler should provide a safe state for the philosopher to pursue philosophical matters; in return, the philosopher is a grateful and docile subject. Furthermore, monarchy is treated as a 'natural' phenomenon. In *De Clementia* (1.19), Seneca uses the example of a bee colony to demonstrate that monarchy is a natural system of governance. In a similar fashion, *Ep.* 73.6 likens the gratitude the subject owes to their rulers to other natural phenomena such as the cycles of the sun and moon or the seasons. For this relationship in *De Clementia*, see Braund 2009, 68-70.

who respects and admires his former teachers (*Ep.* 73.4).¹⁸ That Seneca uses roles in this analogy that both he and Nero have played cannot be accidental.

Seneca's unwillingness to bestow congratulations unto Nero becomes even more noteworthy when compared to his other contemporary writings. In his *Naturales Quaestiones*, also addressed to Lucilius, Seneca repeatedly makes passing references to the success of Nero's principate and the virtues of its leader.¹⁹ In that work, Nero is portrayed as a wise patron of natural philosophy, a "great lover of the other virtues and especially of truth" (*NQ* 6.8.3), and a line of his "elegant" poetry is borrowed, approvingly, to describe the feathers of a dove (*NQ* 1.5.6). Nero's reign is made out to be so fortunate (*NQ* 7.21.3) that, when a comet appeared during his rule, the reputation of comets as an ill omen that signifies the changing of rulers was overturned (*NQ* 7.17.2).²⁰

How can this inconsistency between the two texts be explained? The answer lies in the public dissemination of a treatise such as the *Naturales Quaestiones*. Like other Senecan treatises, the *Naturales Quaestiones* is public facing, explicitly presented as a work written for and accessible to educated Romans.²¹ In contrast, the *Epistulae Morales* claim to belong to a more private sphere. At times, these letters detail the research that is conducted behind the scenes of the *Naturales Quaestiones*, such as in *Ep.* 79.1-2, where Seneca tasks Lucilius to write back detailing natural topics such as Charybdis and the mountain Etna for the benefit of his own research.²² In the public sphere, praise of the *princeps*, no matter how hollow, was expected. This is what we see in treatises such as the *Naturales Quaestiones* or *De Clementia*. In letters that purport to be private affairs, the absence of such praise is not unusual. Since, however,

¹⁸ Edwards 2017, 167; Rudich 1997, 68-9.

¹⁹ On the dating of the *NQ*, see Williams 2017, 182 & Hine 2010, 10.

²⁰ Seneca refers to the comet of 60 CE which resulted in the exile of Rubellius Plautus (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.22). The second comet of Nero's reign, at the end of 64 CE (*Annals* 15.47), likely postdates this work.

²¹ As per Hine (2006, 53) it is not unimportant that Seneca is writing natural philosophy in Latin, incorporating Latin legal terms and quotes from the great Latin poets (Hine 2010, 15). The work is catered towards a specifically elite, senatorial audience.

²² There are other interesting ways, beyond the scope of this thesis, in which the *Epistulae Morales* and *Naturales Quaestiones* are in conversation – and contrast – with each other. Griffin (1992, 350-1) highlights the inconsistency with which Seneca discusses Lucilius' moral progress in both these contemporary works. Williams (2008, 220-1) picks up on this inconsistency, questioning whether Seneca may be employing doublespeak when he invents an interlocution, praising Lucilius' 'own' voice (*NQ* 4a.pref.1.14-17).

Seneca's letters reached a wider readership, the absence of praise suggests a sense of disillusionment.

3.4 *Epistula 7: Allusion and Arenas*

Ep. 7 has, so far as I am aware, escaped the attention of scholars when it comes to assessing the possible subversive subtext in this collection. As Edwards rightfully highlights, *Eps. 5* and *6* provide an important prelude to this entry; in those letters, Seneca encourages the philosopher's coexistence and cohabitation with the community that surrounds him.²³ "The very first thing philosophy promises" Seneca explains "is fellow feeling, a sense of togetherness among human beings" (*Ep. 5.4*). So as not to alienate the populace, Seneca advises Lucilius not to imitate the anti-social practices one would expect from a Cynic: rough clothes, unkempt hair, and other ascetic practices (*Ep. 5.2*). Seneca's concern for the reputation of philosophy is already tantalising, a disapproving nod, perhaps, to the outspokenness of philosophers such as Thræsea.²⁴ The advice in *Letter 7* marks a change, instead advising Lucilius to retreat from the public.

This letter, which vividly details Seneca's trip to a local arena and quickly moves to the reproach of the crowd's enjoyment of the ordeal, has several unique properties about it. It marks the first of Seneca's narrative passages in the collection, demonstrating his philosophical teachings in a practical, everyday manner.²⁵ In Henderson's view, this first foray into the streets is as close as Seneca comes to discussing the city of Rome; Henderson reasons that this first contact with the crowd so repulses the philosopher that future letters see him continue to withdraw.²⁶

For senators living under Nero, the arena had become an all-too-familiar location. As discussed in Ch. 2.3, Nero garnered considerable disapproval for humiliating elite Romans by having them appear in arena fights. From 59 CE, following the death of Agrippina and at the Juvenalia games, senators and equestrians regularly participated

²³ Edwards 2019, 82.

²⁴ The negative reputation of philosophers as being inimical to the state is recorded in Capito's speech against Thræsea (*Ann.* 16.22).

²⁵ Edwards 2019, 82.

²⁶ Henderson 2004, 13.

in arena shows (Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.14; Suetonius, *Nero* 12, Dio 61.17 & 19).²⁷ By 63 CE, Tacitus remarks that the number of women of distinction and senators (*feminarum inlustrium senatorumque*, *Ann.* 15.32) participating in that year's fights was greater than before. Based on these accounts, we can conclude that as early as 59 CE and before 63 CE, senatorial participation in Nero's arena fights had become a regular occurrence. Suetonius puts the number of senators fighting in Nero's arena games at four hundred (*Nero* 12); if this figure is anywhere close to reality, many senators had at some time participated in the emperor's games, not to mention the fact that others had viewed these performances from the stands. Seneca's references to the arena allude to these games hosted by Nero; it follows that elite Romans reading Seneca's letter would turn their minds to the gladiatorial shows put on by the emperor, in which they themselves participated.

To set the stage of *Letter 7*, Seneca advises Lucilius that if he is to make moral progress, he should avoid spending time among the masses (*turbam*, *Ep.* 7.1).

Never do I return home with the character I had when I left; always there is something I had settled before that is now stirred up again, something I had gotten rid of that has returned. [...] Every single person urges some fault upon us, or imparts one to use, or contaminates us without our even realizing it. [...] Nothing, though, is as destructive to good character as occupying a seat in some public spectacle, for then the pleasure of the sight lets the faults slip in more easily.

(*Ep.* 7.1-2)

To illustrate his point, Seneca describes his outing to a show where he witnesses a gruesome gladiatorial show. Unarmoured fighters are viciously pitted against one another, and Seneca quips that the victor wins only the privilege of partaking in further killing (*Ep.* 7.4). Next, Seneca's attention turns to the crowd, for where the letter betrays a sense of pity towards the gladiators, the spectators are characterised as excessive in their cruelty (*Ep.* 7.5). At this point, one is inclined to question whether

²⁷ According to Suetonius and Dio, both senators and equestrians were involved in these fights from the outset. Tacitus only mentions the equestrians who were compelled to fight in these shows.

Seneca is merely commenting on human cruelty, or whether this is also an allusion to Nero's conduct in eagerly putting on these fights.²⁸

There are, admittedly, a few factors that strain the analogy between Seneca's letter and Nero's conduct. For one, Seneca describes the combatants in his letter as criminals (*noxii*), a far cry from the aristocratic fighters of Nero's shows (*Ep.* 7.4-5).²⁹ Furthermore, the executions Seneca describes are just that – executions, albeit with a crowd; they lack the performative spectacle associated with shows put on by Nero³⁰, and are portrayed more as a violent display for the crowd. In contrast, the fights put on by Nero in the Campus Martius to celebrate the opening of Nero's new amphitheatre were not lethal affairs; Suetonius remarks that not even condemned criminals were put to death (*Nero* 12) though, as Griffin contends, “there is no warrant for thinking Nero made a habit of this mildness”.³¹ That is, the opening celebration was the exception that proved the general rule of violence.

Whatever the case, these details serve to distance the letter from the realities of Nero's Rome. Simultaneously, this distancing may have been a deliberate choice, engineered by Seneca to deliver his criticism more indirectly.

Despite these factors that appear to distance the letter from imperial spectacle, a close examination of Seneca's narrative suggests a different story. Let us examine the conditions under which Seneca finds himself at the arena: “Purely by chance, I found myself at the midday show, expecting some amusement or wit, something relaxing to give people's eyes a rest from the sight of human blood. On the contrary!” (*Casu in meridianum spectaculum incidi lusus expectans et sales et aliquid laxamenti, quo hominum oculi ab humano cruore adquiescunt; contra est; Ep.* . 7.3). The circumstances by which Seneca has come to the show are unclear, though a lack of agency on the philosopher's behalf is suggested (*casu*). So why has Seneca decided to attend the show? We must consider the fact that Seneca was still, officially, part of Nero's entourage.³² Was Seneca accompanying the emperor to the show? Whether this

²⁸ It is noteworthy that Suetonius (*Nero* 4) attributes a love of exceedingly violent spectacle to Domitius, Nero's father. The apple does not fall far from the tree, in this case.

²⁹ Edwards 2019, 83.

³⁰ See Chapter 2.3.

³¹ Griffin 1992, 69 & 72n.4. Additionally, Griffin notes that others would have perished by combat.

³² For Seneca's continued involvement with court duties after the 'retirement' of 62 CE, see the expert analysis of Griffin (1992, 359-9). Seneca's situation is described as a “half-way position” between political participation and complete philosophical retirement.

was the case or not, we must also not forget that, owing to his position, Seneca would be seated amongst other senators in the arena.³³ When he paraphrases the bloodthirsty sentiments of the crowds at *Ep.* 7.5, he is repeating the sentiments of his fellow senators. In other words, the letter reprimands these senators for indulging in the violent spectacles of the arena.

The dynamic established so far is the following: Seneca positions himself as an outsider – a philosopher among the crowd, but not one of them. Senecan literature often portrays the gladiator as a noble figure, someone to be envied by philosophers for their steadfastness in facing death.³⁴ That motif is wholly abandoned here in favour of portraying the fighters as the victims of the crowd.

With all this said, what are the vices Seneca ascribes to the crowd? The themes of punishment and human cruelty seem to revisit ideas from both *De Clementia* and *De Ira*. To briefly rehearse some of the points made in Chapter 2.1, Seneca claims that the king and tyrant are identical in all ways, save for the king's proclivity towards *clementia* (*De Clementia* 1.11.4). So, the clement Nero in *De Clementia* is sparing when it comes to dishing out punishments (*De Clementia* 2.1.1-2), whereas the tyrant would enjoy the opportunity for cruelty (*tyrannis saevitia cordi est; De Clementia* 1.12.1). The echoes of this sentiment are present in *Ep.* 7 regarding the crowd's outlook on punishment (7.5):

“But one of them committed a robbery! He killed somebody!” So what? He is a murderer, and therefore deserves to have this done to him, but what about you? What did you do, poor fellow, to make you deserve to watch this?

Seneca concedes that the gladiators are deserving of punishment, but it is the crowd who is at fault for drawing pleasure (*voluptas*) out of this cruelty (*crudelitas*). Seneca portrays the vice of cruelty as an illness, contagious in nature.³⁵ By attending gladiatorial games as spectators, the elite crowd propagate the vice of cruelty.³⁶

³³ On the matter of elite seating at games, refer to Livy 1.35.8, Dio 55.22.4, Suetonius, *Claudius* 21.

³⁴ As an example, see *Ep.* 70.26-7. *Ep.* 37.2 portrays the plight of the philosopher as even more dire than that of the gladiator. Littlewood 2015, 164-5 & Edwards 2019, 84.

³⁵ The contagious nature of vices is present in *De Ira* 3.8.1-2.

³⁶ See Cagniard 2000 (esp. 611) for more on Seneca's views that these spectacles served no purpose (*utilitas*). I must note that Cagniard's thesis that Seneca enjoyed the games by the merit that he attended them does not hold; the fact that he attended games does not point to his support, and in fact, his attendance might be seen as a requirement of his station as Nero's chief minister.

3.5 Revisiting the Scene of the Crime: Veiled Criticism in the Campanian Letters

In Chapter 1.3, it was briefly mentioned that Seneca embarked on extended trips to Campania. These letters from the countryside offer colourful descriptions of Roman seaside towns – Naples, Baiae, Pompeii – while detailing the philosopher’s day-to-day activities at a noisy bathhouse (*Ep.* 56), a local lecture on philosophy (*Ep.* 76.3), or a tempestuous voyage by boat (*Ep.* 53). The Campanian letters are rich in biographical detail and are already fertile ground for Neronian critique. Adding further intrigue to these letters, as many scholars believe, is the fact that Seneca was likely drawn out from Rome to Campania as part of Nero’s imperial retinue.³⁷

As Ker eloquently puts it, “the historical strata of the Campanian landscape are a match for [the] complexity” of Seneca’s letters.³⁸ Indeed, the learned Roman would find much cultural significance in the region; a recurring motif – discussed later in this section – is Campania’s role as a staging ground for the Second Punic War, a theme first introduced at *Ep.* 51.5 and returned to much later in *Ep.* 86 when Seneca visits the villa of Scipio.

As established in Chapter 2, the towns of Campania had also come to be a favourite venue for Nero. Tacitus tells us that the emperor’s decision to make his public debut in the theatre of Naples was due to the city’s propensity for Greek culture (*Ann.* 15.33). Nero’s informed decision suggests a strong familiarity with the region.³⁹ For Griffin, Seneca’s comment deriding the theatregoers at Naples while on his way to a lecture on philosophy is a clear rebuff of Nero’s artistic pursuits; Nero may have been performing at that very theatre at the time.⁴⁰ The most notable event in recent Roman memory at the time, of course, was the murder of Agrippina at Baiae in 59 CE. On that note, one will recall that the towns of Campania were the first to rally behind the emperor and offer their congratulations following the controversial act. Several of

³⁷ See Griffin 1992, 93 n. 2 & 359-60, and Ker 2009, 344.

³⁸Ker (2009, 344-5) provides an insightful look at Campania’s cultural significance.

³⁹Nero’s public theatrical debut appears to be near the beginning of 64 CE. The dates for Seneca’s first series of Campanian letters (*Ep.* 49-59) are *t.p.q.* mid 63 CE (possibly the summer?), *t.a.q.* early 64 CE. The second trip to Campania is around the end of June in 64 CE, as Seneca kindly mentions at *Ep.* 86.16.

⁴⁰ Griffin 1992, 360.

Seneca's passages in these letters seem to allude to the circumstances of Agrippina's death. Henderson imaginatively reads the image of Seneca floundering in the Neapolitan waters as reminiscent of Agrippina's dash to safety after the collapse of her barge.⁴¹ *Ep.* 55 opens with Seneca walking along a bay that is later (*Ep.* 55.7) revealed to be Baiae, and visiting the home of Vatia, which appears to be only a stone's throw away from the villa where Agrippina met her demise (*Ann.* 14.4-5). While Seneca is generally vague when it comes to locations mentioned in the *Letters*, his whereabouts are clearly described here, as if to place himself at the location of Agrippina's murder deliberately.⁴² In other words, techniques of allusion appear to be deployed liberally by Seneca in this series of letters.

While these allusions may seek to evoke memories of Nero's great crime, they do not by themselves carry any clear moral message; this task Seneca reserves for his characterisation of Baiae itself. For Seneca, the coastal resort is a blight on the otherwise picturesque Campanian landscape. So repulsed is the philosopher that he could only bear spending a single day before being compelled to leave (*Ep.* 51.1).

What exactly is so unbearable about Baiae? While Seneca is willing to concede that the wise man will find no place objectionable (*Ep.* 51.2), he also asserts that some places are more conducive to an excellent character than others – Baiae is not conducive to excellence for “it has become a hostelry of vices” (*deversorium vitiorum esse coeperunt*; *Ep.* 51.4). *Luxuria*⁴³ is the vice Seneca associates with the town, a kind of immorality that is made out to be particularly damaging to one's character. Since the town is portrayed in a state of constant revelry, Seneca worries that such a place is bound to incite the individual towards damaging pleasures (*voluptatum*; *Ep.* 51.5).⁴⁴

So far, Seneca has built up a damning image of Baiae as a party town and has involved Nero in the conversation through the emperor's association with the area, if not by the fact that he is writing from the imperial retinue. But, while Seneca has spoken on the adverse effect pleasure has on one's character, drinking and revelry is still a far cry from Nero's tyrannical behaviour. At *Ep.* 53.8, however, Seneca expands on how this

⁴¹ Henderson 2004, 158 n. 1.

⁴² The point of Seneca's vagueness regarding the locations described within the collection (particularly in the city of Rome) is well made by Henderson (2004, 159).

⁴³ “self-indulgence” in Graver & Long (2015).

⁴⁴ See Champlin 2003, 156-8.

luxuria is damaging to oneself. Self-indulgence is made out to be a ‘gateway vice’ (*Ep.* 53.8):

If I yield to pleasure, I must yield to pain, to toil, to poverty. Ambition will insist on the same rights over me, and so also will anger. With so many passions (*adfectus*), I shall be pulled in one direction and another; indeed, I shall be torn to bits.

Seneca views these vices in a holistic manner, where giving way to one vice is a slippery slope that gives way to others. The mention of anger in the above passage once again invites comparisons to *De Ira*, which contains similar sentiments. In that treatise, Seneca explains that pleasure softens one’s body and mind, making one unable to endure any adversity and causing the mind to lapse into anger (*De Ira* 2.25).⁴⁵ As one will recall from Chapter 2.1, anger and the pleasure drawn from such passions marked Gaius as a tyrant in *De Ira*. The dangerous pleasures of a place like Baiae, it seems, can influence one’s mind to become similarly cruel.

The relationship between ambition and tyranny is somewhat more difficult to pin down. In the letters, ambition (*ambitio*) is portrayed as contrary to the philosophical retirement Seneca advises. As Edwards explains, Seneca regards ambition as a mental disturbance along the lines of anxiety.⁴⁶ In *Ep.* 73.3, discussed above, Seneca describes *ambitio* as the overarching fault of those subjects who are politically active:

Those who are politically active never give a thought to how many people they have overtaken, but only to those who are out in front. The pleasure of seeing many behind them is nothing to the pain of seeing even one still ahead. All forms of ambition have this defect: they never look back. Nor is it only ambition that finds no rest, but every form of desire, for desire is always beginning afresh from its fulfilment.

The danger *ambitio* poses to good Roman government is encapsulated well here: it drives statesmen to compete against each other. Intrinsicly, the last person “ahead”

⁴⁵ At *De Ira* 2.19, Seneca presents a biological explanation of the phenomena, where pleasurable activities heat the individual’s blood, driving one’s temperament towards anger as fire and heat is associated with movement and vigour.

⁴⁶ Edwards 2017, 167, in relation to *Ep.* 56.9.

of the ambitious senator will be the emperor himself. In other words, vices amongst senators would naturally lead to a precarious state of government.

As is often the case, Seneca's criticisms here appear to be targeted at a dual audience, addressed to both the emperor and those within his inner circle. Ultimately, Seneca warns that licentious and self-indulgent behaviour – typical of Baiae – breeds a weakness of character which will lead to adverse effects in the political sphere. These vices promote *crudelitas* and associated tyrannical behaviour for the emperor and ambition in his subjects, resulting in a dangerous situation. The best course would be to avoid Baiae and its associated vices altogether, as Seneca intends to.

3.5.1 A Tale of Two Villae

As mentioned above, the Second Punic War played an important role in the cultural memory of Campania. Seneca casts the popular heroes of that conflict in their own personal battle with the vices of Baiae. Though Hannibal was able to overcome the Alpine mountain range and win many victories against the Romans, he is ultimately defeated, according to Seneca, by his sojourn in Baiae: “though victor in arms, he was vanquished by vice” (*armis vicit, vitiis victus est, Ep. 51.5*). Seneca casts himself and Lucilius as ‘soldiers’ in an ongoing ‘battle’ against vices; they aim to conquer vice. For the duo, the need to overcome vice is so critical that he claims there is more at stake in their campaign than for Carthage’s warriors (*Ep. 51.7*).⁴⁷

The honourable exile of Scipio at Liternum stands in stark contrast to Hannibal’s failed foray into Campania. The harsher conditions of that villa more effectively strengthened his spirit (*Ep. 51.11*). For now, this is all Seneca has to say about the villa of Scipio, reserving a thorough treatment for when he tours the villa (*Ep. 86*). Meanwhile, on the topic of notable Romans spending time and building villas in Baiae, Seneca pardons Marius, Pompey and Caesar on the grounds that they built them atop hills to survey the surrounding area, as a general would; they are, in fact, strongholds rather than villas (*scies non villas esse, sed castra; Ep. 51.11*). Good Romans, it seems, avoid the licentious bay-town. The contrasting personalities of Hannibal and the Roman figures serve to illustrate how vices weaken one’s character.

⁴⁷ Seneca seems to portray the two campaigns (his own and the one of the Punic soldiers) as contemporaneous (*licet; Ep. 51.7*). This serves to draw urgency to the matter.

Seneca summons another Roman exemplar to drive home his message, a contemporary of Scipio and Hannibal, the elder Cato (*Ep.* 51.12). In a satirical and humorous manner, Cato is invoked as the ultimate authority on the matter:

Do you think Marcus Cato would ever have lived there [Baiae]? Why? To count the adulterous ladies sailing by, the many kinds of pleasure boats painted in different colors, the roses floating all over the lagoon? To hear the musicians' nightly racket?

The answer to Seneca's outlandish scenario is a resounding "no"; Cato would have preferred the rough conditions of the military camp, much more conducive to a good character (*Ep.* 51.12).⁴⁸

As has become apparent, Seneca is repeatedly creating a contrast between the virtuous and the immoral. Continuing this narrative, Seneca tours the estate of Servilius Vatia, a wealthy ex-praetor renowned for his idleness. However, the lines between virtue and vice are somewhat more blurred at the home of Vatia; Seneca's own faults are put on display, the idleness of Vatia is – somewhat – praised, and the Epicurean retreat that is his villa is portrayed in a positive light.⁴⁹

We open with Seneca returning from a day trip travelled by litter. He comments that he is just as tired as if he had walked the distance as nature intended and reminds Lucilius that "soft living punishes us with weakness" (*Ep.* 55.1). The vices of Campania appear to be affecting Seneca, and he is adopting the very practices he swore off in *Ep.* 51. The dangers of vice are put on full display; not even the wise Seneca is immune to their hazards. We learn that his journey took him to the villa of Vatia, an extravagant domicile that neighbours Baiae and contains grottoes, a stream, a beach, and a lake *within* its premises (*Ep.* 55.7). Seneca remarks that the self-sustaining villa housed – and indeed protected – Vatia during the most turbulent years of Tiberius' reign (*Ep.* 55.3). The similarities between Seneca's withdrawal from Nero's court and Vatia's retirement are evident enough, especially as the opening of the letter casts Seneca in similar idleness.

⁴⁸ Cato is here being used as a deceased exemplar, someone to keep in one's mind and emulate, as Seneca suggests in *Ep.* 11.8-10. See Edwards 2018, 342-3.

⁴⁹ The Epicurean associations of Vatia's villa is recognised by Motto and Clark (1973, 195), and by Henderson (2004, Chapter 8).

Seneca's reception of Vatia's behaviour is somewhat mixed. The latter's premature retirement is viewed as cowardly (*vita ... ignava*), different from the philosophical leisure Seneca encourages for himself and Lucilius (*Ep.* 55.4). Nevertheless, Seneca admits that there is something to admire even in this meagre imitation of philosophical leisure, owing to the sacred (*sacrum*) and respectable (*venerabile*) nature of philosophy (*Ep.* 55.4). Yet, while Seneca admires Vatia's devotion (*constantia*) to idleness, he observes that the former praetor is not, ultimately, living for himself but to fulfil base desires by overeating, lazing about, and indulging his lust (*ille sibi non vivit, sed, quod est turpissimum, ventri, somno, libidini, Ep.* 55.5).

As Seneca had established in his assessment of Baiae, the sage can practice good living regardless of location; the topic of locales to practise philosophy is revisited towards the end of this letter. The town of Baiae lies next to Vatia's villa, though this is not seen as a particularly bad thing. Vatia's home, Seneca claims, enjoys the pleasures of that town without its inconveniences (*incommodes illarum caret, voluptatibus fruitur, Ep.* 55.7). The sentiment seems somewhat uncharacteristic. Was it not these pleasures (*voluptatibus*) that were the danger of staying at Baiae? Henderson offers a well-reasoned explanation on this conundrum. The pleasures the villa contains are inherent to the Campanian landscape: the grottoes and streams, the way the home catches west wind (*Ep.* 55.7).⁵⁰ All these features serve to mark the villa as an idyllic habitat for philosophical retirement. Vatia squandered this opportunity. At last, Seneca returns to the conclusion he reached at Baiae (*Ep.* 55.8):

But location does not really contribute much to tranquillity. What matters is a mind that accommodates all things to itself.

Simply put, the moral lesson of this letter is, as Schafer humorously summarises, "do not be a dissolute playboy".⁵¹ To Seneca's elite audience, the philosopher's diatribe regarding the vices of Baiae and the idleness of Vatia in his exquisite Campanian villa may have come across as relevant to their own personal state of affairs. However, Seneca's letter suggests that virtue can be practised even in opulent country homes; indeed, he was used to defending such a position, as evidenced by the attack made by

⁵⁰ Henderson 2004, 89.

⁵¹ Schafer 2011, 46.

Publius Suillius in 58 CE, who questioned what moral tenets allowed Seneca to accrue such wealth while in service to the emperor (*Ann.* 13.42).⁵²

Seneca's exploration of Scipio's home in *Ep.* 86 is an inversion of the circumstances at Vatia's estate. Unlike that luxurious resort house with its idle owner, the villa of Scipio is austere, its owner the very model of moderation and duty to one's country (*egregiam moderationem pietatemque*, *Ep.* 86.1). This villa lacks the grottoes and water features of Vatia's estate. Instead, the functional architecture of Scipio's home reminds the reader of the *castra*-like homes at Baiae (*Ep.* 51.11). Seneca describes Scipio's villa as follows (*Ep.* 86.4):

I have seen the villa, built of squared masonry, the wall enclosing the grove, also the turrets rising in front, guarding the entrance on either side; the cistern below buildings and lawns, capacious enough for the needs of an army; and the cramped bathing quarters (*balneolum angustum*).

The austere amenities are suited for a virtuous lifestyle, and Seneca is invited to reflect on Scipio's habits – particularly his style of bathing – and compares them to those of his contemporaries. There is a distinct contrast between modern baths and those of Scipio's time. Seneca conjures up exquisite descriptions of the decorations commonly found in newer bathhouses: elaborate flooring and wall decorations, oversized mirrors, glass ceilings, and taps made of silver (*Ep.* 86.6). Borrowing a trope from satire, Seneca describes the excessive luxury of a wealthy freedman's bathhouse, complete with columns built only for decoration rather than support, alongside endless statues and fountains (*Ep.* 86.7). The decorations are excessive, and needlessly so.

In contrast, Seneca's description of Scipio's dingy bathhouse is fittingly minimal. The room is small and dark (*angustum, tenebricosum*, 86.4), with its tiny windows admitting little light (*Ep.* 86.8). If anything, the room is described by what it lacks compared to modern bathhouses; Seneca conjures up the objections of his contemporaries who deplore the archaic bathroom, remarking how there are no wall decorations nor lighting and how murky the bathwater is (*Ep.* 86.11). This is no issue for Seneca, however, as he recognises the practicality of the facilities. Scipio only used the bath to clean himself of the dirt – not perfume – accrued from working the land (*Ep.* 86.5 & 11). Seneca imagines the scene with a sense of nostalgia: Scipio's

⁵² An attack against Seneca's riches was also brought up after the death of Burrus in 62 CE (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.52).

bathhouse is a relic of old Roman *mores*. Constant innovation leads to more and more elaborate bathing rooms and practices. To demonstrate this point, Seneca paraphrases a story from Horace's *Satires* (1.2.27), where the glamorous Bucillus is marked as a fop by the way he smells of breath mints (*pastilles*, *Ep.* 86.13). However, Seneca remarks that people would be repulsed by Bucillus' scent in his time, for he does not wear perfume nor reapply it throughout the day (*Ep.* 86.13). The elaborate bathing practices of Seneca's contemporaries move further and further away from the virtues of Scipio's simple regimen. Seneca encapsulates this idea in a clever paradox: "Now that fancy bathhouses have been invented, people are much filthier" (*postquam munda balnea inventa sunt, spurciores sunt*, *Ep.* 86.12).

The ethical advice that comes out of the letter is quite simple at its core: emulate the exemplars of old – here Scipio (86.4: *ex consuetudine antiqua; priscos mores*, 86.12) – rather than the contemporary fashion-chasers. To Rimell, the inverse relationship between extravagant baths and immoral living suggests that there is a timeless quality to the simple bathing techniques of Scipio.⁵³ It is pointless to become too invested in these modern bathing practices, as they will soon be thought of as undignified. Virtuous practices, on the other hand, will endure.

For the final part in this exploration of Campanian *villae* and the moral messages hidden within, let us examine the allegorical ties Seneca draws between himself, Scipio and Vatia. The trio are all "exiles" from the Roman political scene, pursuing leisure and solitude (*otium et solitudo*) in differing ways, to varying degrees of success.⁵⁴ Needless to say, Scipio is far more successful in his retirement than Vatia. What Seneca praises at great length, however, is Scipio's conduct in withdrawing from the state. To this end, Seneca rewrites the narrative supplied by Livy: in that earlier literary tradition, Scipio's self-exile is portrayed as an unfitting end to the general's life. In 184 BCE, Scipio and his brother are brought up on corruption charges following the Seleucid War. On the day of his trial, Scipio resigned himself to his Campanian villa, where he lived out the final year of his life (Livy, 38.50 & 39.52). Livy reports that Scipio was inimical to Rome at the end of his life and requested to be buried at

⁵³ Rimell 2013, 8.

⁵⁴ Ker 2009, 349-50. Rimell (2013, 6) also identifies Scipio as Seneca's "partner" in exile.

Liternum so that “no funeral should take place for him in his ungrateful fatherland” (*ne funus sibi in ingrata patria fieret*, 38.53).⁵⁵

In Seneca’s narrative, Scipio’s retirement is counted amongst his greatest achievements. Like Livy (38.50), Seneca reasons that Scipio had grown too distinguished for Rome, to the extent that the law could not treat him equally. Seneca imagines Scipio’s departing words (*Ep.* 86.1-2):

It had to be one or the other: Scipio at Rome, or Rome at liberty. “I want nothing,” he said, “that will detract from our laws and customs. Let all our citizens be equal under the law. O my homeland, make use of the service I have done you, but do so in my absence. I am the reason that you are free; I will also be the proof of it: I will depart, if I have grown greater than is in your interests.”

Seneca writes that by retiring, Scipio made “[Rome] his debtor not only for Hannibal’s exile but for his own” (*Ep.* 86.3). That is, by withdrawing from Rome’s political scene, Scipio renders a great service onto the state. In addition, his *otium* was well spent, not overcome by vice like Hannibal’s winter in Campania (*Ep.* 51.5). In Seneca’s narrative, Scipio is twice victorious over Hannibal: first at Zama, and next in matters of virtuous behaviour.

How might Seneca’s aristocratic Roman audience read such a passage? The reader of the letter is invited to draw parallels between the political withdrawals of Seneca and Scipio. Rome is better off for Scipio’s retirement. That is what Seneca wishes to convey by rewriting Livy’s narrative. Seneca casts himself as Scipio in this episode, telling the viewer that he is benefitting Nero’s Rome by absenting himself from its politics.⁵⁶ Seneca’s circumstances are not identical to those of Scipio’s at the time of retirement: Scipio has grown too big for Rome, while Seneca is left powerless after Burrus’s death and is subject to the whims of a *princeps* increasingly trending towards tyranny. Nevertheless, both find an admirable course in the way they pursue a lifestyle centred on virtue.

The Scipio of Liternum embodies a recurring ethical lesson in Seneca’s works: the wise man can give service to the state – more effectively even – when he is practising leisure (*otium*). In an earlier treatise, *De Otio*, Seneca outlined two types of

⁵⁵ Ker 2009, 347-8.

⁵⁶ The point is especially well made by Rimell (2013, 6), who highlights the many dichotomies found in the letter. See also Ker 2009, 352.

commonwealth (*duas res publicas*, *De Otio* 4.1): a lesser one, which encompasses cities and states, and a greater one which encompasses all human and divine beings (*dii atque homines continentur*, *De Otio* 4.1).⁵⁷ It is seemingly only in a state of *otium* that the wise man can effectively serve this greater republic by pursuing a virtuous lifestyle. As Seneca had instructed Lucilius near the beginning of the collection, “those who appear to be doing nothing are doing greater things – they are dealing with matters both human and divine” (*Ep.* 8.6).

What is the ultimate message of this historical allusion to Scipio’s exile? In the Campanian letters, Seneca is involved in rewriting recent history, that is, setting the record straight. Seneca’s retirement – like Scipio’s – is not to be attributed to a failure in his political acumen. He is not like Vatia, who was *hiding* from the dangers of politics. Nor does Seneca make himself resemble the Roman elites who have adopted *luxuria* to their own detriment. The philosophical *otium* he now pursues is grander and more important than his previous post as Nero’s advisor. Through this reimagining of shared cultural history, and by identifying himself with so grand a Roman exemplar, Seneca creates a strong contrast between the virtue of his current position and the vices common in his fellow Romans. The moral disparity could not be greater.

3.6 The *Domus Aurea* and the ‘Golden’ Age of Nero

A further example of Seneca’s hidden criticism involves the *Domus Aurea*. To Seneca, this superstructure comes to encapsulate all that he disapproves of in Nero’s Rome. The *Domus Aurea*, Nero’s palace, constructed in the wake of the Great Fire of Rome, is in Seneca’s view symbolic of a great error in the minds of his contemporaries: they covet the splendour of riches over the splendour of philosophy and a virtuous life (*Ep.* 115.6-7 & 10). This topic has already been extensively covered by Edwards and Champlin, who expertly highlight Senecan associations of gold and “solar ideology” with Nero’s reign.⁵⁸ In this section I will summarise these references to the palace before offering further insight into the way Seneca’s criticism operates.

⁵⁷ For a more in-depth treatment of this philosophical cosmology, especially with regards to the Stoic imperative of philosophical participation, see Griffin 1992, 328 ff. See also the discussion of Erskine 1990, 68-9.

⁵⁸ See Edwards 2017, 172 and Champlin 2003, 127-9.

Through various architectural markers, Seneca draws the reader's attention to the topic of Nero's newly established palace. As discussed in section 3.2, *Ep.* 91 postdates the devastating Great Fire of Rome. Based on Tacitus' account we can deduce that construction of the *Domus Aurea* commenced shortly after this fire (*Ann.* 14.42). It is thus reasonable to assume that *Ep.* 91 and subsequent letters postdate the beginning of the palace's construction. *Ep.* 90 and 115 appear to contain the most direct references to the Golden Palace.⁵⁹ The following allusions in *Ep.* 90 are tentative, of course, as Nero's palace would have been in its early stage, if construction had begun; at the very least, Seneca would have been privy to Nero's plans and familiar with his former pupil's tastes.⁶⁰

Ep. 90 is a lengthy letter in which Seneca discusses the origins of civilisation and the role of philosophy. The letter contains Seneca's musings on primitive humans, who lived according to nature and embodied philosophical wisdom, granted to humans by divine beings (*Ep.* 90.1-5). Seneca favours the simplicity and austerity of the past, viewing the present as needlessly decadent.⁶¹ To drive his message home, Seneca poses the following rhetorical question (*Ep.* 90.15):

Who do you think is wiser today: the one who discovers how to make saffron perfume (*crocum*) spurt to a huge height from hidden pipes (*fistulis*), who fills or empties channels with a sudden gush of water, who constructs movable panels for dining-room ceilings (*versatilia cenationum laquearia*) in such a way that the décor can be changed as quickly as the courses; or, alternatively, the one who shows himself and other people how nature (*natura*) has given us no commands that are harsh or difficult, that we can shelter ourselves without the marble worker and the engineer, that we can clothe ourselves without the silk trade, that we can have everything we need if we will just be content with what the surface of the earth has provided.

Seneca chastises the excesses of the dining-room its architect has constructed with sprinklers to drop perfume from a ceiling that featured rotating imagery. The scene is

⁵⁹ Edwards (2017, 172) also notices references to Nero's palace in the water features and grand buildings described in *Ep.* 86 – discussed above – and in *Ep.* 122. I have chosen not to include *Ep.* 86 in this section, as it was penned in the June of 64 CE (*Ep.* 86.16), therefore predating the Great Fire. The focus of *Ep.* 122 is more on habits than architecture, which is why I have opted to focus on other letters in this section.

⁶⁰ Edwards 2019, 259.

⁶¹ Similar to the discussion on bathhouses in *Ep.* 86, discussed in Chapter 3.5.1

reminiscent of another piece of Neronian literature, Petronius' *Satyricon*, in which Trimalchio's *triclinium* features a similar device that smothers Encolpius with perfume as he attempts to dine (*Sat.* 60). Seneca's description is also comparable to the way Suetonius describes the many dining rooms found in the *Domus Aurea* (*Nero* 31):

The banqueting halls had coffered ceilings fitted with panels of ivory which would revolve (*cenationes laqueatae tabulis eburneis versatilibus*), scattering flowers, and pipes (*fistulatis*) which would spray perfume (*unguenta*) on those beneath. The principal banqueting chamber had a dome which revolved continuously both day and night, like the world itself.

The grandiose features and vocabulary in these two descriptions are remarkably similar. Even accounting for the fact that Seneca may have been commenting on lavish dining rooms more generally, the features of the *Domus Aurea* are certainly reprimanded by Seneca. His former pupil's opulent tastes are denounced here and contrasted against a much simpler lifestyle, one that is more befitting the wise man (*sapiens*, *Ep.* 90.13).

Continuing the narrative of the campaign against the many vices of Nero's Rome is *Ep.* 115, in which Seneca attacks human greed and its baseless obsession with gold. The letter begins in an innocuous manner, with Seneca telling Lucilius not to fret too much about making his writing overly dignified (*Ep.* 115.1).⁶² As Seneca continues, he argues that one whose mind is too caught up in such trifling manners is also likely occupied by other trivial matters; manners of speech are compared to different styles of clothing, and Seneca likens overly rehearsed speech to "prettified youths" (*comptulos iuvenes*, 115.2) from whom you should expect nothing of substance. In contrast, a virtuous man's speech is more casual (*remissius loquitur et securius*, 115.2). Next, Seneca pivots to examine the mind (*animum*, 115.3) of this upright man and is dazzled by the light (*fulgentem*, 115.3-4) of all the virtues it contains. As Champlin explains, the contrast is made here between the true brilliance of virtue and another sort of superficial splendour.⁶³ Once again, Seneca employs architecture to showcase these: marble walls, decorative columns, and gilded ceilings are used as examples of false splendour (115.8-9).

⁶² On this topic, see Chapter 1.2 and *Ep.* 75.

⁶³ Champlin 2003, 128.

Already, Seneca has drawn attention to the opulent homes of Roman elites. In what follows, the philosophers deplore Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, claiming that poets unwisely praise gold (*Ep.* 115.14-15):

As far as the poets are concerned, the immortal gods have nothing better to give or to possess for themselves.

The palace of the Sun was high on lofty columns,
splendid with shining gold.

And look at his chariot:

The axle was of gold; the shaft was gold;
the curving wheels were rimmed about with gold;
and silver were their radiating spokes.

They also speak of the "Golden Age," (*saeculum aureum*) meaning to portray that as the best era.⁶⁴

The Ovidian passage is drawn from the myth of Phaethon and describes the palace and chariot of the sun god Apollo. All the elements of this passage – the palace, the chariot, the sun god himself – can be seen as allusions to the emperor. To begin with, as Champlin and Edwards argue, Nero had for a long time been associated with the sun god, whether through coinage depicting the emperor as Apollo, or through the emperor's public image as charioteer and musician.⁶⁵ In Seneca's own *Apocolocyntosis* it is Phoebus Apollo who, alongside the Fates, ushers in the Golden Age of Nero during the emperor's divine coronation (*Apocol.* 4.1-2). The sun god's golden palace is analogous to Nero's own *Domus Aurea* – the locus of all the false splendour Seneca's contemporaries obsess over.

Seneca's critique of Neronian society in these two letters operates through allusion and contrast. In both cases, Seneca begins by drawing the audience's attention to the grand designs of contemporary Rome, especially the *Domus Aurea*. After directing the readers' minds to the excesses of these buildings, Seneca contrasts these extravagances with the sober ethical behaviour derived from philosophy. The emperor and his circle,

⁶⁴ The passages are *Metamorphoses* 2.1-2 and 2.107-8 respectively. Graver & Long 2015, 573.

⁶⁵ Champlin 2003, 112-4, 127-9; Edwards 2017, 172.

alongside any other affluent Roman elites, are made to look inadequate and second-rate next to the virtuous behaviour Seneca showcases.

3.7 Conclusions

From this brief examination of just a handful of letters, a clearer image of the *Epistulae Morales* as a work of veiled criticism emerges. Individually, these cases might be seen as coincidental or isolated instances where Seneca alludes to the political context in which he composes these letters. When viewed together, however, it becomes apparent that Seneca wrote these letters intending to include repeated admonishments against the immoralities he perceives in Nero's reign. Seneca's contemporaries were likely more receptive of these criticisms than modern readers initially are. By noting the sheer number of references which seem to critique aspects of Nero's regime, however, Seneca's project of veiled criticism becomes more discernible in a work that appears otherwise apolitical.

This chapter highlighted three techniques – allusion, omission, and contrast – through which Seneca relates criticism against the *princeps*. As outlined early on, these methods of criticism would have to operate in an oblique fashion to avoid making Seneca's dissidence obvious. Of the three techniques explored in this chapter, omission was demonstrably the most oblique and difficult to detect. But by using the case of an infamous event, we could exploit *Ep.* 91 to point to the way Seneca avoids discussing the Great Fire of Rome. Seneca's omission is notable due to how recent and widespread the destruction caused by the fire was. A Roman audience would surely have expected mention of the fire, and by failing to do so Seneca draws attention to the topic. Seneca's audience would also have been familiar with the rumours that Nero was responsible for starting the fire; when factoring in that Seneca is avoiding discussion of the fire to avoid charges of *maiestas*, the omission of the Great Fire of Rome becomes tantamount to the suggestion that Nero was responsible for the inferno.

The omission of praise for Nero in *Ep.* 73 also works similarly by making the reader question why Seneca does not comment on current events. If, as Seneca claims, retired philosophers are most indebted to rulers who allow them to pursue *otium*, then one would expect Seneca to congratulate the emperor for allowing him to pursue philosophical matters. By making no mention of Nero, the reader is forced to question Seneca's judgement of the emperor. In both instances, Seneca conveys his disapproval

of Nero through silence by omitting any mention of the emperor when a suitable chance arises. Through signalling his disapproval in this covert manner, Seneca also safeguards himself from charges of *maiestas*.

The other techniques of criticism – allusion and contrast – often proved to work in tandem: allusion is used to highlight some fault in Nero’s reign, while contrast provides a more virtuous alternative. As shown in this chapter, Seneca alludes to Nero’s vices through various events and locales. Gladiatorial events and arenas can be read as allusions to the rampant *crudelitas* among Roman elites, while places such as Baiae and the *Domus Aurea* represent excessive *luxuria*. As demonstrated, Seneca deliberately picked these topics due to their relationship to the emperor’s misdeeds, such as the employment of elite Romans in arena fights or the murder of Agrippina at Baiae. Once Nero’s vices are demonstrated through allusion, Seneca often compares them with a more virtuous course of action. In the tours of Campanian *villae*, Scipio was portrayed as living a more successful retirement than the idle Vatia, while the man who contents himself in a simple dwelling is presented as wiser than the man who designs the complex mechanisms of the *Domus Aurea*. At every turn, events and places associated with Nero are undermined and supplanted by virtuous counterparts. While the ways in which Seneca critiques Nero are indirect and oblique, the many cross-references between the topics relayed in the *Letters* and the accounts of ancient sources suggest that Seneca’s audience would have been receptive to these instances of hidden criticism.

CHAPTER 4

Veiled Criticism in *Letters* 14 and 18

Introduction

This thesis began with an examination of the epistolary genre to determine the character and readership of the *Epistulae Morales* (Ch. 1), before turning to the historical and political context of Nero's reign to understand the circumstances in which the letters were penned (Ch. 2). Noting the turbulent circumstances surrounding Seneca's political career, it seemed odd that the *Epistulae Morales* were seemingly devoid of any political references. A further examination of the moral lessons found in the letters revealed numerous passages that related to events and locations important to Nero's reign (Ch. 3). This chapter has a narrower focus in presenting two case studies that refer to several contemporary *political* events in a covert fashion. The two letters examined in this chapter show how Seneca is capable of discussing his thoughts on imperial politics through a moralising tone.

As Chapter 3 revealed, Seneca employs various techniques in criticising the *princeps* in a safe and covert manner. The references he makes in these letters usually relate to a deleterious event or a vice Nero displays. Through an examination of several letters in Chapter 3, it has become clear that this hidden criticism is quite common in the collection. In this chapter, I focus on two early letters – *Ep.* 14 and 18 – to highlight the way in which they offer commentary on the shortcomings of Nero's age. Both letters are written towards the end of 62 CE, shortly after Seneca's retirement, and

appear to contain numerous references to events that can be identified and corroborated by our ancient sources.

My aim in selecting these two letters is to reinforce the argument that dissident ideas are widespread throughout the letters. Therefore, I have chosen one letter with overt political themes (*Ep.* 14), while the other appears – at first glance – casual and unexceptional (*Ep.* 18). I argue that *Ep.* 14 paints the political landscape of Nero’s Rome as a dangerous and corrupt place beyond repair. Seneca here urges Lucilius to withdraw from Neronian politics while commenting on and evaluating the effectiveness of outspoken senators who loudly proclaim their disillusionment with the emperor. In *Ep.* 18, Seneca shares his criticisms of the Saturnalia festival, specifically regarding the excessive and constant revelry of elite Romans. A closer examination of this letter reveals the ways in which Seneca critiques the practises of Nero and his circle in a more forthcoming manner.

4.1 Letter 14

In Seneca’s fourteenth letter, the philosopher comes tantalisingly close to revealing Nero’s “shadowy presence”¹ – perhaps more so than in any other letter. Throughout the collection, Seneca typically eschews political topics in favour of philosophy and private study. In *Ep.* 14, however, Seneca is in the early stages of attempting to convince Lucilius to withdraw from his political career, forcing him to broach the topic of political danger. The letter reintroduces the earlier theme of withdrawal from the public while leading a new discussion about the relationship between rulers and subjects. The theme of public withdrawal is first introduced in *Ep.* 7, where Seneca advises Lucilius to avoid the crowds (*turbam*) as they expose the would-be philosopher to immoral behaviour (*Ep.* 7.1-2 & 8).² In *Ep.* 14, Seneca elaborates on the dangers the public poses to the philosopher: the threat posed is not only to the mind of the philosopher but also to his body (14.1-3).

While Seneca maintains the standard Stoic view that the body is merely a vessel for the soul, he nonetheless advises Lucilius to preserve his body where possible by avoiding those things which endanger it (*Ep.* 14.1). According to Seneca, three things

¹ Edwards 2017, 166, as quoted above p. 15 and 68.

² See Ch. 3.3.

give cause for fear and may be damaging to the body: poverty (*inopia*), disease (*morbi*), and the power of those with authority (*vim potentioris*) (*Ep.* 14.3-5):

Even so, let us avoid not only danger but also discomfort, as much as we can, and retreat into safety, constantly devising ways of keeping away the objects of fear. If I am not mistaken, those objects are of three kinds. We fear poverty; we fear disease; and we fear the violent deeds of those more powerful than ourselves. Among all these, the one that has most impact on us is the threat from another's power, for this arrives with a great deal of noise and activity. The natural evils (*naturalia mala*) I mentioned, poverty and disease, come on in silence; they have no terrors to strike our eyes and ears. But the evil of another makes a great show (*pompa*): it is encompassed with fire and sword, with chains, with packs of wild animals primed to leap upon our human vitals. Imagine here the jail, the cross, the rack, the hook, the stake [...] and everything else that savagery (*saevitia*) has devised.

The three dangers to the body are further subdivided: poverty and disease are made out to be 'natural evils' (*naturalia mala*, 14.4). Seneca downplays the threat of these evils by associating them with the Stoic concept of *natura*, thereby ascribing the cause of these evils to chance.³ While steps can be taken to avoid poverty and disease, it is ultimately not in the Stoic's power to avoid his fate. However, threats from those in power could be avoided with some careful manoeuvring, as Seneca reveals in this letter.

Seneca describes various tools which are representative of the power of those with authority. The paraphernalia described are associated with both the arena and torture (*Ep.* 14.4-5). The spectacle (*pompa*) of the arena, with all its weaponry and wild animals, recalls the bloodthirsty crowd of *Ep.* 7.⁴ In that letter the self-indulgence of being a spectator to violence leads one's character to become cruel and inhumane. The descriptions found in both letters bears a close resemblance to *De Ira*, in which Seneca spends a portion of the third book describing the spectacle with which tyrants throughout history indulged their cruelty (*De Ira* 3.14-19). The most recent in Seneca's

³ Compare to Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.6.9-10. "As long as the future is uncertain to me, I always hold to those things which are better adapted to obtaining the things in accordance with nature; for god himself has made me disposed to select these. But if I actually knew that I was fated now to be ill, I would even have an impulse to be ill." Trans. Long & Sedley (1987, 58J).

⁴ Discussed in Ch. 3.4.

chronology of tyrants is Caligula, who tortures and executes numerous Roman senators and *equites* to gratify his anger.⁵ As described in *De Ira* 3.19, the instruments of the tyrant are largely the same as the ones recounted in *Ep.* 14.5: the whip, the rack, fire, and so on. To Seneca's audience, these descriptions of torturous paraphernalia would indeed have evoked vivid images associated with tyrannical acts.

At 14.7, Seneca continues his warning for not offending those in power. The party in question, he clarifies, at different times might be the populace (*populus*), the senate, or an individual (*singuli*) who hold the power over the state. Here Seneca represents three governmental systems, a typical democracy, republic, and monarchy,⁶ to show that political dangers are present in all types of state. The correct course for the sage, in any case, is to avoid provoking those in power by staying clear of public affairs completely. The advice given here is largely reminiscent of Seneca's previous discussions of political retirement in *De Otio*. In that treatise, a Stoic was permitted to abstain from political participation if he lived in a state that was so corrupt as to be beyond help (*De Otio* 3.2). In a mode of philosophical withdrawal and virtuous introspection, the Stoic would cease to serve the lesser commonwealth (*res publica*) of the state but would instead serve the greater commonwealth – the larger cosmopolitan state found in Stoic thought (*De Otio* 4.1-2). In short, the first half of this letter has established politics as a dangerous arena that poses several threats to the individual. Additionally, Seneca thinks it is a justifiable course of action for the would-be philosopher to avoid the political arena.

As Seneca continues, he asks the question whether any state exists that the wise Stoic could stomach. After all, the model state of Athens had condemned Socrates to death and sent Aristotle into exile (*De Otio* 8.2). It has been argued that Seneca implies here that the choice between public service and *otium* does not even exist; any wise person would recognise that philosophical withdrawal is the only choice as no state exists that is worthy of the *sapiens*.⁷ In both *Ep.* 14 and *De Otio*, Seneca expertly practices the “dual enterprise”, as Habinek puts it, of “steering clear of the emperor while making it obvious how and why he was doing so”.⁸ By saying that the wise man should avoid those in power, no matter what system of government is in place, Seneca masks his

⁵ See Ch. 2.1.

⁶ The triad also described in Polybius, *Histories* 6.11.

⁷ Griffin 1976, 332; Schofield 2015, 80.

⁸ Habinek 2014, 15.

avoidance of Nero in the guise of general advice. To Seneca, Lucilius, and any other aristocratic Roman reader, it would be evident who held the reins in the empire. Furthermore, it is important to note that Seneca is relaying what the idealised Stoic wise person would do; it is the *sapiens* who avoids provoking those in power or withdraws from politics on account of the corrupt state. Seneca, we are led to believe, merely imitates the course of wisdom. Interestingly, Seneca employs the exact same allegory – a ship sailing the ocean and avoiding storms – to describe public service in both *De Otio* and *Ep.* 14. In the epistles, a further addendum is made to this advice: the wise person will make sure that it does not seem that he is avoiding these ‘storms’, lest such behaviour is mistaken for condemnation (*Ep.* 14.8):

He avoids the power that will do him harm, being cautious all along not to be seen avoiding it. For this too is part of safety, to be circumspect in pursuing it, since evasive action amounts to condemnation (*quae quis fugit damnat*).⁹

This additional piece of advice betrays a sense of vigilance on Seneca’s behalf.

Once Seneca has made it clear that the wrath of those in power is to be avoided, he shares with Lucilius some advice on how to do so. Here, we can adduce interesting parallels to the later period of Nero’s reign, as described by Tacitus. The two pieces of advice offered are these (*Ep.* 14.9):

First of all, let us not desire the same objects: strife arises among those who are in competition. Then, let us not possess anything it would be very profitable to steal, and let there be very little on your person that is worth taking.

If, as suspected, it is the *princeps* that Seneca is looking to placate, then the first piece of advice is especially relevant. As Tacitus describes, following the death of Burrus in 62 CE, the praetorian prefect Tigellinus capitalised on Nero’s fear of would-be imperial claimants (*Ann.* 14.57). This fear was likely a long-held one on Nero’s part; after all, the first victim of his plots after he became emperor had been his stepbrother Britannicus. Tigellinus directed Nero’s insecurities against Rubellius Plautus, the great-grandson of Tiberius, and Cornelius Sulla, another member of the Julio-Claudian dynasty through Plautus’ grandmother, Antonia.¹⁰ Both Plautus and Sulla had been sent to provinces – Asia Minor and Germany, respectively – and Tigellinus warned

⁹ See further Wilson 2015, 144-5.

¹⁰ The niece of Augustus.

Nero that the armies of these territories would support the claim of the pretenders. If Tacitus is to be believed, Tigellinus' warnings were not entirely unfounded, as it is implied in his comments that the Asiatic legions might have joined Plautus, had he not opted for suicide (*Ann.* 14.58-9).

The entire event roughly coincides with the dating of *Ep.* 14; Tacitus describes the deaths of Plautus and Sulla immediately after Seneca's withdrawal from Nero's court in 62 CE. Moreover, if *Ep.* 18 describes the Saturnalia of December 62 CE,¹¹ then *Ep.* 14 must have been written earlier that year. Competition, or at least the potential of posing a threat to the *princeps*, had been the cause of demise for Plautus and Sulla. It is unsurprising, then, that Seneca's first and foremost piece of advice is not to appear as a threat to the interests of those in power.

As to the second piece of advice (possessions worth stealing), we may ask why Seneca would suggest *not* to possess anything "profitable to steal". The answer may lie in the Senatorial phenomenon of prosecution between its members. Senatorial prosecutions, as Osgood has highlighted, were not merely a chance for skilled orators to display their abilities; successful prosecutors were awarded a quarter of the accused's property.¹² The turbulent year of 62 CE also saw the trial of the praetor Antistius Sossianus, whose poetry was perceived as abusive against Nero (*Ann.* 14.48).¹³ The trial was significant because it was the first charge of treason (*maiestas*) under Nero's reign, and set a precedent for future prosecutions.¹⁴ *Delatores* were invited to create more elaborate attacks against defendants to prove an offence to the emperor had been perpetrated.

It follows that the wealthier the senator the more appealing a target he was for these *delatores*, and who amongst the Roman elite was a wealthier target than Seneca? An earlier denunciation in 58 CE claimed Seneca had accumulated 300 million sesterces in service to the imperial household (*Ann.* 13.42).¹⁵ The advice of poverty Seneca gives in *Ep.* 14 suddenly becomes very sensible. As Wilson pointedly states, modern associations between wealth and security can complicate our understanding of the conundrum in which elite Romans often found themselves.¹⁶ For all the benefits of

¹¹ Or 63 CE, according to the short chronology, which would lend even more strength to the argument.

¹² Wilson 2015, 143. See Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.20.1.

¹³ This trial occurred early in 62 CE, so definitely before *Ep.* 14 was written.

¹⁴ See Ch. 2.2.3.

¹⁵ For comparison, the two accusers of Thrasea Paetus were awarded 5 million sesterces each (*Ann.* 16.33).

¹⁶ Wilson 2015, 149-50.

wealth, it also became a source of insecurity. As attacks against Seneca mounted after the death of Burrus, Tacitus recounts a private meeting between Seneca and Nero where the philosopher pleads for retirement and the return of the wealth and estates he had accumulated by the emperor's grace (*Ann.* 14.52-6). The reliability of the account has often been questioned,¹⁷ but the episode shows that Tacitus was mindful of the dangers Seneca's wealth had brought him.

Thus far (14.1-10), Seneca has presented a reasonably convincing case about the dangers of public life. At *Ep.* 14.11, the alternative philosophical life is presented as sacrosanct – like that of a priest's – ensuring one's safety as this quiet introspection would never produce rivalry. What follows is a nuanced and complex counterexample, in which Seneca is forced to discuss the actions of Marcus Cato. After claiming that philosophy must be practised in a moderate manner (*modeste*), Seneca anticipates Lucilius' objection to this claim, imagining him as an interlocutor who presents Cato as a "poor example" (*malum exemplum*) of this tactful approach to statecraft. In opposition to the behaviour Seneca has been championing in this letter, Cato's outspokenness during the civil war had placed him at odds with both Caesar and Pompey. Cato's actions in the civil war were a common subject for debate in both philosophical and rhetorical schools, and at *Ep.* 14.13 Seneca seems to reproduce one of these stock debates:¹⁸

What are you up to, Cato? The contest is not for freedom; that was lost long ago. The question is whether Caesar or Pompey will possess the state. What have you to do with such a controversy? It is no business of yours to take sides in it. It is a master that is being chosen: what difference does it make to you who wins? It is possible that the better man will win, but it's not possible to win without being the worse for it.

The debate here, an example of a rhetorical exercise (*suasoria*), questions the intent of Cato's rivalry against Caesar and Pompey, and criticises his behaviour as futile. Seneca supplements the argument by recalling Cato's earlier politics, where his outspokenness

¹⁷ I.e., Tacitus probably invented much of the exchange. See Wilson 2015, 144; Griffin 1992, 372 n. 1.

¹⁸ Griffin 1968, 374 n.6.

resulted in him being removed from the senate and, on one occasion, jailed (*Ep.* 14.13).¹⁹

As Griffin rightly argues, Seneca does stand by this criticism of Cato.²⁰ For one thing, the debate he reproduces is not consistent with the way he praises Cato throughout the letters: in *Ep.* 71.8-11, Seneca admires the way he faced setbacks and failures with equanimity. His defeat at Pharsalus is not seen as a futile gesture, but rather a chance to exercise Stoic indifference regarding the outcome of the battle. Likewise, in *Ep.* 104.33, Seneca quotes Cato as having said that “if Caesar wins, I will choose death; but if Pompey wins, I will go into exile”. Whatever the outcome of the civil war, Cato and the Republic are worse off for it. Despite this, Seneca praises the way Cato exercises constancy (*constantia*) of character and opposes both Caesar and Pompey during this conflict. The conundrum posed by Cato’s behaviour is not resolved here in a satisfactory manner; on outspokenness, Cato may have been the exception rather than the rule.

At this point in the epistle, two threads of discussion have emerged: first, whether the *sapiens* would participate in politics, and second, whether avoiding the wrath of those in power will keep a person safe. Seneca defers discussion of the first topic, instead opting to focus on the benefits of avoiding public dangers. At *Ep.* 14.15, Seneca admits that the elusive behaviour he recommends will not guarantee absolute safety. He once again conjures up the metaphor of a ship at sea: “ships have been known to sink in harbor – but what do you think happens in the middle of the ocean?” Safety is never a guarantee but is more likely when not incurring the contempt of those in power.

It is tempting to see a link between Seneca’s advice in this letter and the political behaviour of Thrasea Paetus, the chief instigator of senatorial resistance against Nero. In 59 CE, as many senators praised Nero on the murder of Agrippina, Thrasea withdrew himself from the senate in protest.²¹ While before he had contented himself with silence while the senate heaped flatteries onto the emperor, this act of defiance marked the beginning of a seven-year withdrawal from senatorial duties (*Ann.* 14.12). This campaign of abstention resulted in his death in 66 CE, when he was brought to

¹⁹ Seneca is perhaps referring to a story reproduced in Suetonius, *Caesar* 20. Cato attempted to veto one of Caesar’s laws in the senate. In response, Caesar ordered a lictor to remove him from the senate house and imprison him.

²⁰ Griffin 1968, 375.

²¹ See Ch. 2.2.2.

trial by Cossutianus Capito on Nero's behalf. When *Ep.* 14 was written, Thrasea was in the middle of his withdrawal from the senate. Thrasea and Seneca undoubtedly knew each other; the two Stoics operated in the same circles, and Tacitus mentions that in 63 CE, Seneca congratulated Nero when the *princeps* and Thrasea temporarily reconciled (*Ann.* 15.23).

The similarities between the outspokenness of Cato and Thrasea seem to have been apparent enough to an ancient audience: in Capito's prosecution speech which Tacitus recreates, Capito states that "just as Caesar and Cato were the talk of a strife-hungry citizenry, so now are you, Nero, and Thrasea" (*'ut quondam C. Caesarem' inquit 'et M. Catonem, ita nunc te, Nero, et Thraseam avida discordiarum civitas loquitur.'*, *Ann.* 16.22).²²

What was Seneca's intention when including this warning in *Ep.* 14? He may have intended to dissuade Thrasea and other senators from inciting a rivalry with Nero. Again, Seneca focuses on the futility of Cato's outspokenness in *Ep.* 14. Seneca likely sensed similar futility in Thrasea's continuous provocation of Nero. As Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.12) remarks, when Thrasea removed himself from the senate, he caused "danger for himself without initiating freedom for the rest" (*sibi causam periculi fecit, ceteris libertatis initium non praebuit*). Seneca acknowledges that Nero's Rome is a dangerous place for the philosopher-politician but advises against outspoken dissidence against the emperor.

4.2 Letter 18

As the culmination of this thesis, this section presents the case for seeing *Ep.* 18 as a critique of Neronian Rome. Seneca's apparent references to Nero's errant behaviour have been pointed out before;²³ however, this section offers a novel approach in that it interprets this letter as a measured and covert denunciation of Neronian values.

An early letter in the collection like *Ep.* 14, *Ep.* 18 once again has Seneca discussing how best to maintain virtuous behaviour in his philosophical withdrawal amid societal pressures. In particular, he is here found debating the question whether to partake in

²² Thrasea, like countless other Stoics under the principate, viewed Cato as an *exemplum*. Thrasea wrote a *Life of Cato*, which was in turn one of Plutarch's chief sources (*Life of Cato*, 25.1 & 37.1).

²³ I follow the excellent commentary by Edwards (2019).

the festivities of the Saturnalia. The letter opens with Seneca stating, “The month is December, and the city is sweating, more than ever” (*december est mensis; cum maxime civitas sudat*, *Ep.* 18.1). This opening is immediately striking for many reasons: to begin with, Seneca scarcely mentions anything that dates the letters. This statement is the closest any of the letters come to an identifiable date – somewhere around the middle of December in 62 CE.²⁴ Moreover, this is the only instance in the collection in which a Roman holiday is described, even though the letters were written over the course of several years. These oddities are coupled with the remark of the city’s denizens sweating in the middle of winter as if to signal that they are in an unnatural state. Following this disconcerting opening line, Seneca turns to the source of this unease – the Saturnalia. The festival is accused of giving license to “public self-indulgence” (*luxuriae publicae*, *Ep.* 18.1), transforming the city into a state reminiscent of the Baiae portrayed in later letters.²⁵ Preparations for the festival so totally consume Rome that Seneca comments “what used to be the month of December is now the entire year!” (*Ep.* 18.1).

On closer inspection, this letter’s opening includes several comments that can be read as allusions to Nero’s misdeeds. It is through Nero’s associations with the Saturnalia festival that Seneca directs the minds of the audience to the emperor. Just as the description of Baiae evokes the death of Agrippina in *Ep.* 55,²⁶ so too could mention of the Saturnalia easily remind Seneca’s audience of Nero’s past cruelties relating to the festival. The most noteworthy of these is the murder of Britannicus.²⁷ While the killing of Nero’s stepbrother did not occur during the Saturnalia, a notable event that led to the murder did. At the Saturnalia of 54 CE, when Nero was crowned the *rex Saturnalicus*,²⁸ he bid Britannicus to perform a song in an attempt to embarrass him. Nero’s ploy backfired when Britannicus performed a song that painted himself as Claudius’ rightful heir and Nero a usurper; according to Tacitus, Britannicus’ song earned him much sympathy with the other courtiers, while creating ill-will towards Nero (*Ann.* 13.15). The anecdote is a testament to Nero’s increasing malice.

²⁴ On the chronology of the letters, refer to Ch. 1.3.

²⁵ See Ch. 3.5 & 3.5.1.

²⁶ As discussed in Ch. 3.5.

²⁷ Discussed in Ch. 2.2.1.â

²⁸ The master of ceremonies. Champlin 2003, 151. See also Eden 1984, 101.

Seneca's remark about December spanning the entire year also warrants examination as a likely reference to the *Apocolocyntosis*. In this satirical work, the divine Augustus delivers an indictment against Claudius' apotheosis, claiming that he is not fit to be a god and that no other god would sponsor his divine ascension. The reign of Claudius is characterised as a *perpetual Saturnalia*, with Claudius himself as the *rex Saturnalicus* (*Apocol.* 8.2):

If he had asked this favour from Saturn, whose month he celebrated all the year round as Carnival Emperor [*Saturnalicus princeps*], he would not have received it.

In these lines Seneca clearly criticises Claudius for several of his faults: his excessive banquets and ruling in an arbitrary, absurd fashion.²⁹ The idea of a perpetual Saturnalia represents a state of constant excess, *luxuria*, and permanent abandonment of social order. While earlier Senecan works such as the *Apocolocyntosis* and *De Clementia* had high hopes for Nero's reign, here Seneca confirms that Rome has regressed to the sorry state of the Claudian era.³⁰ Despite all these allusions which implicate Nero in this letter, there is no mention of the emperor or even Rome in general. Seneca makes it clear that he wishes to discuss matters relating to the emperor without making it apparent that he is doing so.

The question Seneca poses for himself and Lucilius is how best to navigate this festival that represents all that is rotten in Nero's Rome: should a philosopher stand apart from the crowd by not partaking in the festival, or should he avoid putting himself at odds with the general populace? The question is a recurring one in these early letters: as discussed above, *Ep.* 7 and 14 posit that association with the *turba* is harmful to the philosopher's mind and body. At the same time, *Ep.* 14.8 suggests that the philosopher who avoids public life should make sure not to appear obvious in doing so. Of course, given the pair's separation, advice from Lucilius regarding the immediate conundrum Seneca faces is impossible.³¹ Instead, Seneca *imagines* Lucilius giving advice: he would advocate an intermediary course of action, neither shunning the festival nor

²⁹ Eden 1984, 101. For Claudius in particular, the perpetual Saturnalia also symbolises the reversal of roles within the imperial household. That is, Claudius was subservient to his freedmen throughout the entire year. Edwards 2019, 112.

³⁰ As Edwards (2019, 112) points out, the trope of the eternal Saturnalia representing excessive banqueting is also present in Petronius, *Satyricon* 44.4.

³¹ As discussed in Chapter 1.3. See also Edwards 2019, 112.

partaking in the traditional manner. Instead, the wise man would join the Saturnalia, but would not partake in its excessive banquets; rather, he would double-down on his ascetic practices and subsist on a meagre diet in coarse clothing (*Ep.* 18.3-5). As Edwards points out, this practice of “extreme abstinence” is a “reversal” that fits the theme of the Saturnalia – where the roles of masters and slaves were reversed – while also coinciding with wise philosophical practice.³² In the conclusion of Chapter 2.3, I used a passage from Epictetus (*Discourses* 1.2.12) which outlined the moral dilemma faced by Stoic senators, that is, whether they should play along with Nero’s theatrical antics. In *Ep.* 18, Seneca can maintain his philosophical tenets without endangering himself by abstaining from the festival.

Though the letter suggests both donning plain clothes and subsisting on a sober diet, Seneca’s discussion primarily focuses on the latter. On this topic, as is common in these early letters,³³ he incorporates Epicurean philosophy into the moral lesson. Seneca admires the way Epicurus is able not only to subsist but also to take pleasure from a simple diet of porridge, water, and hard bread (*Ep.* 18.7-10). As Seneca reports, Epicurus fasted and ate very basic meals in order to ascertain whether the pleasure he gained was any less than from a full meal (*Ep.* 18.9). According to Seneca, not only can the wise man take pleasure (*voluptas*) from such a diet, but the pleasure gained is stable and sure (*stabilis et certa*), as opposed to the fleeting pleasure gained from an excessive diet (*Ep.* 18.10).³⁴

As may have become clear by now, Seneca is here contrasting the excessive banquets of Nero’s Saturnalia with the rudimentary diet of the philosopher. Despite their expensive delicacies, these lavish banquets provide an inferior, fleeting form of pleasure (*Ep.* 18.10). These excessive banquets, however, are not only held during the Saturnalia. As Seneca already established in the introduction of *Ep.* 18, the Saturnalia festival had become a year-round affair. In his *Annals*, Tacitus recounts just one of Nero’s banquets – the one hosted by Tigellinus in 64 CE, culminating in Nero’s ‘marriage’ to the slave Pythagoras. The excesses of that banquet were spectacular: a pleasure barge was built on the artificial lake of Agrippa beside the Campus Martius, and the shores of the lake were lined with taverns and brothels (*Ann.* 15.37). Of course,

³² Edwards 2019, 109.

³³ Edwards 2019, 9; see also Griffin 1992, 351-2, though Griffin’s comment on Lucilius’ “Epicurean sympathies” perhaps overstates the matter.

³⁴ “Static” and “kinetic” pleasure, as Edwards (2019, 118) distinguishes between the two.

Ep. 18 is written before this event. Nevertheless, Tacitus' remark may help to contextualise the event: he comments that he "shall cite this as an illustrative case to avoid frequent descriptions of the same kind of prodigality" (*Ann.* 15.37), implying that the banquet was not extraordinary, but a regular occurrence. As Champlin has highlighted, there are several similarities between the infamous banquet of 64 CE, and that of the 59 CE Juvenalia described by both Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.15) and Cassius Dio (61.20).³⁵ Both events feature Nero hosting elite Roman men and women on a pleasure barge in an artificial lake, with various establishments lining the water's edge. In Dio's account, Seneca is explicitly stated to be at Nero's side during the emperor's musical performance, the climax of the event (61.20.3).³⁶ These excessive feasts were a recurring feature of Nero's reign, and Seneca had experienced a few of them first-hand.

So far, Seneca has signalled his displeasure towards the excessive and immoral nature of Nero's feasts. Allusions to the murder of Britannicus and the remarks Seneca made against Claudius in the *Apocolocyntosis* serve to direct the reader's mind towards the crimes of Nero's reign. As Seneca continues, he pivots to contrasting these moral failings with wise and virtuous behaviour.

Suetonius' account of Nero's public feasts can help to reveal an additional point of critique in Seneca's letter. Suetonius' portrayal of these feasting habits describes the events more generally, not focusing on a particular one. He remarks that these banquets (*epulas*) were drawn out from noon to midnight, with the emperor taking baths between courses to refresh himself (*Nero* 27).³⁷ Aside from the maritime theme of these banquets, Suetonius also remarks on the exorbitant cost of these meals: he comments that a friend of the emperor spent four million sesterces on a banquet where the guests wore turbans (*mitellae*), while another spent even more on a rose dinner (*Nero* 27). The outrageous cost of these events is a topic Seneca references twice in *Ep.* 18 as he lays out his ascetic diet. After first ascribing the basic diet to Lucilius, Seneca explains:

³⁵ Champlin 2003, 153-5.

³⁶ Tacitus only mentions the presence of Burrus.

³⁷ On Seneca's discussion of baths and their relation to moral conduct, see Ch. 3.5.1.

Believe me, Lucilius: you will find it exciting (*exultabis*) to be fed full for a couple of pence (*dipondio satur*); and you will understand that you can be free of anxiety even without the aid of fortune (*Ep.* 18.7).

A little further along, Seneca recites a boast by Epicurus, who took pride in the fact that he could satisfy his hunger for less than a bronze coin, while his fellow philosopher Metrodorus required the whole coin (*Ep.* 18.9). As Edwards observes, this competitive frugality evokes the game-playing element of the Saturnalia.³⁸ The competition here, however, is inverse to the grandiosity of Nero's banquets. This philosophical competition is about who can be satisfied by less, not more. If Seneca praises those philosophers who can draw pleasure out of such a paltry meal, he surely must not think much of one who requires ostentatious banquets to fill his stomach. The contrast between the two extremes is stark.

In closing the letter, Seneca turns to the topic of anger, bringing the criticisms of excess into focus, and relating it to the dangers of tyranny. The theme of anger is introduced through another of Epicurus' maxims: "Anger beyond bounds begets insanity" (*inmodica ira gignit insaniam*, *Ep.* 18.14). Seneca goes on to liken the destruction that anger causes to that of an uncontrolled flame. The devastation that one's anger can cause is like the description of Gaius' anger in *De Ira*, as seen in Ch. 2.1, where the late emperor's uncontrolled anger manifested in the torture and killing of many elite Romans. The link between excessive banqueting and excessive anger is not difficult to make, as Seneca later explains in *Ep.* 53.8, *luxuria* – self-indulgence – is a gateway vice.³⁹ To yield to one of these moral weaknesses is to yield to the others. Nero, whose banqueting and revelry are unending in Seneca's evaluation, has indeed succumbed to such a fate. The events of a previous Saturnalia had, after all, driven Nero to fratricide.

4.3 Conclusion

The two early letters examined in this chapter put on display the dangerous and immoral realities of Nero's Rome. In *Ep.* 14, Seneca communicates that outspokenness and direct confrontations with the emperor were a perilous endeavour. Meanwhile, in *Ep.* 18, the excesses and *luxuria* of Neronian festivals were put on full display, and a

³⁸ Edwards 2019, 117.

³⁹ As discussed in Chapter 3.5.

multitude of references to other Senecan literature work to link the Saturnalia festival with Nero's many unscrupulous acts. Together, these letters serve to paint Nero as an emperor who repeats the tyrannical behaviour of his predecessors.

Building on the idea of Seneca's broader readership as established in Chapter 1, it is worthy to note how these two letters might be appreciated by different audiences. It was speculated that the discussion regarding the dangers posed by a ruler in *Ep.* 14 might be seen as a pertinent warning to senators such as Thrasea Paetus, who challenged Nero's authority in an outspoken manner. Conversely, the moral message against the *luxuria* typical of Nero's festivals might be relevant to those elite Romans who questioned whether they should participate in these events, such as the ones mentioned by Epictetus (*Discourses* 1.2.12). Ultimately, the moralising found in both letters attacks the standards of Nero's reign and serve to undermine the actions of the emperor. In this sense, the messages found in these letters are meant for the emperor. At the very least, they all revolve around his actions.

In these case studies, it has been shown that there is an abundant number of references to contemporary political events within the letters. Seneca's warning about competing against those with power (*Ep.* 14.9) was shown to bear relation to courtly tensions about imperial pretenders, such as Britannicus, Rubellius Plautus and Cornelius Sulla. References to the outspokenness of Cato (*Ep.* 14.12-3) could be linked to Thrasea's repeated provocations of the emperor.⁴⁰ The Saturnalia festivities described in *Ep.* 18 disclosed clear references to Nero's many banquets. While the *Epistulae Morales* were 'apolitical' in the sense that they had no explicit references to contemporary politics, closer inspection revealed numerous oblique references. An ancient Roman audience would have been receptive to these concealed allusions.

In these early letters, written in 62 CE, Seneca established his disillusionment with Nero's rule. Hidden criticisms of the emperor are commonly related throughout the letters, as was argued in Chapter 3. In *Ep.* 14 and 18, Seneca signals that the emperor's behaviour would be a topic of his moralising and that he views said behaviour as decadent and tyrannical.

⁴⁰ See Ch. 2.2.3.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis set out to identify where modern scholars might find evidence of Seneca's outspokenness towards the emperor within the philosopher's surviving literary works, as suggested by Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.61).¹ To this end, an argument was put forth for seeing the *Epistulae Morales* as a work that contains repeated (but mostly hidden) references to the immoralities of Nero and presents moralising ideas that stand directly in opposition to the emperor's misdeeds. In Chapter 1, it was established that the letters can, with confidence, be viewed as genuine correspondence. This development allowed us to argue that the *Epistulae Morales* did not carry the expectation of privacy one might associate with the epistolary genre and were likely circulated among the upper echelon of Roman society, thus making the letters far more engaged with the politics of their own times than is often assumed. In Chapter 2, Seneca's political ideas regarding the ideal ruler were examined, which showed that he placed emphasis on virtues, such as *clementia*, which should be encouraged, while vices linked to past tyrants, such as *ira* and *crudelitas*, should be avoided. This chapter also observed Seneca's culpability in Nero's decline into tyranny, particularly regarding the murder of Britannicus and Agrippina. It was shown that Seneca continued to urge the *princeps* towards more virtuous behaviour, even helping to exculpate Nero by penning dialogues, speeches and letters to the senate that emphasised the emperor's innocence. The chapter concluded with Seneca's withdrawal from politics following his loss of power at court due to Burrus' death.

With the historical and political context of Seneca's retirement established, Chapters 3 and 4 turned to the task of articulating how the letters criticise Nero. Chapter 3 explained how Seneca's use of allusion, omission, and contrast direct the reader's attention to Nero's tyrannical behaviour. As shown, allusive references in the letters could be linked to specific events (the Great Fire of Rome, the murder of Agrippina) or a place associated with the emperor's decadent behaviour (Baiae, the *Domus Aurea*), thereby building an implicit contrast between his misdemeanours and the ethical lifestyle recommended in Seneca's letters. In Chapter 4, I laid out how two early letters in the collection communicate Seneca's disillusionment with the state of Nero's Rome. In *Ep.* 14, Seneca explains why philosophers should opt for retirement

¹ See the examination of Seneca's death scene in the introduction of this thesis.

to avoid the wrath of those in power, signalling his disapproval to Stoic politicians who expressed their disapproval of the emperor in an outspoken manner. Meanwhile, in *Ep.* 18, Seneca critiques Nero's unending festivities in the way they promote *luxuria*; in turn, the simple pleasures of the philosopher then contrast with the excesses of these festivities. These two letters share the common theme of proposing strategies for the philosopher to practise philosophy in the corrupt reign of Nero.

What developments have been made in our understanding of Seneca's veiled criticism within the *Epistulae Morales*? It is worth noting that the dissident messages throughout the collection do not appear subversive or confrontational. Seneca never suggests action against the emperor, and Senecan scholars generally deny the rumour provided by Tacitus that he was involved in the Pisonian conspiracy (*Ann.* 15.65).² Rather, the dissident messages within the letters serve to highlight the vices of Nero, undermining said vices through a comparison with philosophical practices of virtue. The lifestyle of philosophical withdrawal in the letters is presented as superior to the politics and parties of Nero's court. Still, one can interpret this disapproval of the emperor's lifestyle and heinous crimes as a form of condemnation. By the time of Seneca's retirement, it is difficult to maintain that he still had any hopes of reforming his wayward former pupil. Instead, the letters formulate a strategy through which the philosopher can survive under a tyrant while quietly expressing his disapproval of Nero's reign.

While we have examined numerous letters, which contain hidden criticism of Nero, other traces undoubtedly remain hidden. These hidden criticisms, however, require a degree of decoding that may elude the modern reader. While the *Epistulae Morales* remain one of the most significant works on the topic of Roman Stoicism, scholars should not discount the letters as a resource that contains Seneca's true thoughts on the tyrannical reign of Nero.

² Griffin 2008, 48-51.

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