PHILOSOPHY AND EROTICS
IN SENECA’S *EPISTULAE MORALES*

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

This study reconsiders the relationship between a Roman Stoic, his pleasure, and his desire in the *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* (Letters to Lucilius) of Seneca. While the Stoic ethical project involves the extirpation of erotic feelings such as pleasure and desire, a version of erotics nevertheless remains. I examine the role of the pleasure and desire which is retained. I examine erotics in the following venues: textual space between author and reader; the medical metaphor; the realm of death; the concept of *ratio*. I conclude that an integral element of the formation of the Roman Stoic subject is the strategic deployment of pleasure in philosophy as well as a desire for the pleasure of philosophy.

In Seneca I observe a pleasure which is intimately connected with his concern for the literary: the employment of the literary itself has philosophical meaning. Seneca’s use of literary stylistics problematizes the Stoic relation to pleasure. Tension between literary form and philosophical content troubles the simple textual dichotomy of form and content. This difficulty in maintaining the distinction of philosophical content from literary form mirrors the ethical and metaphysical difficulty of maintaining the dichotomy of soul and body. Such a distinction comes to bear upon the Stoic philosophy on pleasure, which extirpates bodily pleasure (*voluptas*) while cultivating eternal philosophical joy (*gaudium*).

In Chapter One I present an introduction to the problem of erotics and philosophy. I consider why philosophies based upon reason have difficulty with
erotics, and the various methods employed by these philosophies to negotiate the problem of erotics.

I then explore in Chapter Two how Seneca’s text itself narrates the experience of, and arouses, voluptas. I observe that in the Letters the text is a sort of body (corpus) which is as dangerous a site for pleasure as the physical body. Furthermore, through the identification of the literary work with the individual, Seneca eroticizes not only the text, but also relations between writers and readers.

In Chapter Three I undertake an examination of a traditionally therapeutic Stoic metaphor: philosophy as medicine. In Seneca’s hands this metaphor is transformed from a tried and true method in the expurgation of eroticism into a troublesome site of bodily voluptas.

In Chapter Four I examine how death is envisioned as an idealized locale in which the philosopher is freed from the vulnerability of the written and physical corpora. Death in Seneca releases one from the difficulties of the physical body, and in this way facilitates the long-desired union of self and Philosophy. Death, then, is paradoxically figured as both the final rejection of pleasure and the ultimate fulfillment thereof.

In Chapter Five I examine the injunction ama rationem (Ep. 74), which exemplifies Seneca’s problematization of voluptas. He demands that we strive to live according to reason (ratio), but also that our relationship with ratio be one of amor. Seneca also regularly invokes ratio metaphorically as the ‘account-book’ which must be balanced. In this respect amor rationis signifies not only the Stoic’s pursuit of reason, but also of balance. Amor rationis, then, always leaves us in the red. This desire for balance also finds its expression in the commercial language which Seneca
uses throughout the *Letters*, as well as in the economy of letters which are the *Letters*. In these economies too I observe that *ratio* is never acquired, and that this failure of acquisition only elevates the desire for it.

In Chapter Six I conclude by considering some of the broader ramifications of this study. The work of philosophy is, as it turns out, truly the love (*philos*) of wisdom (*sophia*): this study traces this love-affair between the philosopher and wisdom in Stoic ethics. But the desired love-object is never attained: the philosopher’s identity is bound up in the desire for wisdom. However, that the philosopher’s goal is unattainable does not make his quest futile: rather, the deferral of this ultimate pleasure ensures the continuation of the work of philosophy *ad infinitum*. 
For

my old man
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy and erotics make uneasy bedfellows. When they have had occasion to share textual space the outcome has often been labeled as hedonist. The Marquis de Sade’s Philosophy in the Boudoir exemplifies this hedonistic union of philosophy and erotics. The libertine Dolmancé and his two accomplices educate the young Eugenie in their philosophy of the optimization of pleasure through sex. Sade’s libertine philosophy—as it is espoused and enacted by Dolmancé—has an ambivalent relationship with the reason and rationality which are products of the Age of Enlightenment. Sade’s work, too, is a product of the Age of Enlightenment, and as such may be understood to cultivate reason all the while rejecting it. Dolmancé, for example, explicates the doctrines of libertinage to Eugenie in philosophical speeches. Moreover, his direction of the sexual play is explicitly precise, and its execution calculated to yield the greatest pleasure.\(^1\) And yet, as Dolmancé’s repeated stagings of the sex act grow more elaborate, they defy and exceed reason. That is, the intricate intertwining of human bodies so carefully detailed by Dolmancé / Sade exceeds a reader’s capacity to comprehend it. The clarity of the words yields only a tangle of limbs as reason flounders. Reason is further put on hold as the reality of the narrative dissolves into the surreal.

\(^1\) cf. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) 69: “What seems to matter in such events, more than pleasure itself, is the busy pursuit of pleasure, its organization...”
Jacques Lacan has observed, the violence enacted on Sadean heroine-victims does not mar their beauty, but paradoxically amplifies it. Thus reason is defied by the erotics of Sade.

But what does Sade have to do with Seneca?

I would like to propose that the two have quite a bit to do with each other with respect to their negotiation of the relationship between philosophy, reason, and erotics. Sade’s *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, I have argued above, exhibits an ambivalent treatment of reason in the service of a philosophy of erotics. Seneca’s *Letters*, in contrast, exhibits an ambivalent treatment of erotics in the service of a philosophy of reason. As the Sadean subject is defined by the simultaneous defiance and employment of reason, the Senecan subject is defined by the simultaneous rejection and employment of erotics.

**Philosophy, Reason, Erotics**

The fundamental dichotomy addressed by both Seneca and Sade is that of reason and erotics. Seneca himself outlines some of the points of friction at Ep. 116.5–6, the *locus classicus* for Seneca on erotic love:

> Eleganter mihi videtur Panaetius respondisse adulescentulo cuidam quaerenti an sapiens amaturus esset. ‘De sapiente’ inquit ‘videbimus: mihi et tibi, qui adhuc a sapiente longe absumus, non est committendum ut incidamus in rem commotam, inpotentem, alteri emancupatam, vilem sibi. Sive enim nos respicit, humanitate eius inritamur, sive contempsit, superbia accendimur. Aeque facilitas amoris quam difficutas nocet: facilitate capimur, cum difficultate certamus. Itaque conscii nobis inbecillitatis nostrae quiescamus; nec vino infirmum animum committamus nec formae nec adulationi nec ullis rebus blande trahentibus.’

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3 What I term “erotics” here is—as I will explain in more detail below—the nexus of physical acts and psychological affections associated with sexual pleasure and desire.
Quod Panaetius de amore quaerenti respondit, hoc ego de omnibus adfectibus dico: quantum possumus nos a lubrico recedamus; in sicco quoque parum fortiter stamus.

[I think that Panaetius answered eloquently when a boy asked him whether a wise man would fall in love. He said, “We will see about the wise man; but as for you and me—who are still a good deal behind the wise man—we should not undertake to fall into a condition which is impassioned, powerless, bound to another, and despicable to itself. For if it has returned our gaze, we are stimulated by its compassion, but if it has ignored us, we are incensed by its arrogance. A love’s ease harms us as much its difficulty: by ease we are caught, with difficulty we struggle. So let us sit in peace, since we are aware of our own weakness. Let us make sure not to entrust a feeble soul to wine or beauty or flattery, or anything else that would carry it off with its coaxing.” I think that what Panaetius said to the boy asking about love also applies to all emotions. We should take ourselves as far as we can from the slippery slope; we barely stand firm on dry land.]

Seneca speaks as a representative of Stoicism, the philosophy of reason. For Stoics the essence of existence is reason: reason (ratio) physically pervades the entire cosmos, all movement in the world is governed by cosmic reason, and ethical activity is defined as acting in accordance with reason. The reason which we humans possess mirrors cosmic reason. And the problem with erotic love, in short, is that it interferes with our ability to act in accordance with reason.

Seneca seconds Panaetius’ assessment of love: those of us who are not wise men ought not fall in love because being in love disrupts us, renders us powerless, servile to another, and generally loathsome. That is, love undermines a key principle of Stoic ethics, autarchy: composure, self-sufficiency, self-control. Moreover, it is not only the reciprocated, actualized love which is dangerous, but also the unrequited, rejected love: both arouse immoderate reactions in us. And furthermore, regardless of whether our love is easy or hard to come by, we are still ultimately

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4 I have used Reynolds’ 1965 OCT text of Seneca’s Epistulae Morales, and his 1977 OCT text of the Dialogi. All translations are my own.

5 Cicero gives similar reasons for expunging love at Tusc. Disp. 4.73–76.
pained by it: an easy love quickly secures our servitude, while a difficult love gives us grief. All told, love is exceedingly damaging for the progress of a Stoic philosopher.

But Stoicism is not the only philosophy to take issue with erotic love. Indeed, the difficulties which Seneca / Panaetius identifies are echoed throughout the history of philosophy. Philosophies centered on reason often characterize erotic love as its opposite. In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, for example, bodily desires—such as erotic desires—are embodied in the unruly horse which reason as charioteer must keep restrained at all times.\(^6\) In Seneca, Plato, and others, we see erotics depicted as a disobedient force which at all times threatens to disrupt the equipoise of reason. Judith Butler gets to the heart of the conflict:

> As immediate, arbitrary, purposeless, and animal, desire is that which requires to be gotten beyond; it threatens to undermine the postures of indifference and dispassion which have in various different modalities conditioned philosophical thinking. ... Desire has thus often signaled philosophy’s despair, the impossibility of order, the necessary nausea of appetite.\(^7\)

Butler here (and throughout her book) speaks of desire. My study differs from hers in so far as while Butler is concerned with desire in general and its role in the formation of the philosophical subject, I am specifically concerned with the erotic aspect and its formation of the Stoic ethical subject. That is, I see desire as but one component in a larger constellation, erotics, which an ethics centered on reason needs to “get beyond”.

Let me be more explicit about “erotics”. I borrow this concept of the larger constellation from Michel Foucault:

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\(^6\) Plato *Phaedrus* 246b-248a. Also *Republic* Book 4 436a-441c for the tripartite soul.

\(^7\) Butler (1987) 1-2.
In the experience of *aphrodisia* ... act, desire, and pleasure formed an ensemble whose elements were distinguishable certainly, but closely bound to one another.8

Thus in the experience of *aphrodisia*—that is, “the acts, gestures, and contacts that produce a certain form of pleasure”9 there is a relationship between the act itself, the pleasure it produces, and the desire for a repeat of the act. Foucault refers to the three as an “ensemble”—it is to this ensemble that I apply the term “erotics”. Foucault draws upon ancient evidence (Plato’s *Philebus*) to trace the relationship between the act, pleasure, and desire. It is not, Foucault asserts, pleasure, desire, or the sexual act, individually, which the Ancient Greeks regulate in their ethics, but rather the “dynamic relationship” which continuously transports an individual among the three.10 The danger to ethical integrity lies not in pleasure, desire, or the act individually, but in the relationship between the three. As a result of this relationship one is compelled to repeat the cycle of act-pleasure-desire *ad infinitum*.

Ethical philosophy seeks to control erotics by regulating this relationship. In the Christian era, Foucault observes, the erotic ensemble was dismantled by the disappearance of pleasure, and the focus on desire as an ethical evil. In the ancient world, Foucault claims, this dynamic relationship among the elements of the erotic ensemble was regulated by controlling and monitoring the sexual act, and by extension the site of the act, namely, the body.11 But this is not quite the whole of it. An examination of the ancient philosophical schools will reveal, rather, that their ethical philosophies attempt to regulate the dynamic relationship by either

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8 Foucault (1985) 42.
9 Ibid. 40.
10 Ibid. 43.
dismantling the relationship between the elements of the erotic ensemble, or rejecting a part, or by rejecting all of erotics.

**Ancient Philosophy**

The major philosophical schools of the ancient world negotiated the dichotomy of reason and erotics variously.

We have already observed above how Plato articulates the problem in the *Phaedrus*.\(^{12}\) In the *Symposium*, however, he offers his solution in the well-known speech of Diotima. The erotic love which one feels for the beautiful boy is but the bottom rung of the infamous ladder which leads ultimately to the acquisition of the Form of the good.\(^{13}\) Erotics, then, becomes an indication of the philosopher’s true goal and is ultimately subsumed within it.

Aristotle in turn rejects the notion of a singular Form of the good and proposes instead *eudaimonia* (“happiness”, “flourishing”) as the chief practicable good.\(^{14}\) *Eudaimonia*, like the Form of the good, is to be sought in and of itself. In the pursuit of eudaimonia some pleasures are useful while others are not. The pleasures that accompany virtuous activities are good pleasures, while pleasures that accompany base activities are base pleasures.\(^{15}\) In the same passage Aristotle also notes the difficulty of distinguishing pleasure and activity, since the two are contemporaneous. Desire, on the other hand, can be distinguished because it occurs

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\(^{12}\) Nussbaum (2002) traces the treatment of *eros* in Greek philosophy from Plato to the Greek Stoics. She identifies within *eros* two aspects: 1) reverence, awe, care; 2) madness. This bipartite structure of *eros* is likely derived from the Platonic tripartite soul. Multifaceted *eros* is also key to Nussbaum’s understanding of *eros* in Aristotle. As for the Greek Stoics, Nussbaum observes that they define *eros* as only the first aspect, jettisoning the second. In light of the Stoics’ conception of the unified and rational soul, the soul could not experience both madness and reverence at once. Thus such ambiguity is explained as a wavering of the soul.

\(^{13}\) Plato *Symposium* 211c.

\(^{14}\) Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* 1.1095a.

\(^{15}\) Ibid. 10.1175b.
at a different time. Thus while the status of erotics as virtuous or base activity is unclear—Aristotle never clearly says—it seems to depend upon whether the erotic activity aims at ethical virtue or bodily pleasure.\footnote{There is a fair amount of uncertainty and disagreement on eros in Aristotle. My reading hews closely to Nussbaum (1994) 1581-1583. Price (1989) (esp. Appendix 4, pp. 236-249) asserts that Aristotle guards against the irrational / base aspect of eros, while Sihvola (2002) believes that Aristotle’s conception of eros leaves the irrational aspect intact and remains nonetheless a virtuous activity.} Erotics, then, are rejected if they aim at bodily pleasures. Like Plato, Aristotle posits a divided soul: the rational part of the soul regulates the irrational part.\footnote{Ibid. 1.1102b.} The impulse towards base pleasures such as the erotic are thus the products of this irrational part of the soul. In Aristotle, then, virtuous erotics are domesticated by reason while base erotics is rejected.

The Epicureans, in contrast to both Plato and Aristotle, directly align the good with pleasure. As a result erotics are not shunned outright as detrimental to the pursuit of the good. However, Epicureans discourage emotional attachment from the sex act; engaging in sex for ends aside from the consequent gratification puts one in danger of experiencing mental pain later.\footnote{Lucretius \textit{De Rerum Natura} 4.1094 ff.; Long and Sedley (1987) (henceforth L&S) 21, esp. 21G.} In this way the Epicureans attempt to dismantle the dynamic relationship between the act, pleasure, and desire. Pleasure and the act are considered goods, while desire becomes an occasion for pain. The partitioning off of desire addresses the chief difficulty of a philosophy with pleasure as its goal, namely that pleasure arouses desire for more of the same, a cycle which inevitably leads to pain. Furthermore, the Epicureans differentiate between two types of pleasure, static and kinetic.\footnote{L&S 21Q, 21R.} Static pleasure is constant, maximal, and everlasting, while kinetic pleasure arises and increases with the cessation of pain; Epicureans advocated static pleasure over kinetic, as well as mental pleasures over...
the bodily. Sex, then, is a bodily kinetic pleasure. Erotics are brought into alignment with reason in Epicurean ethics, but in a diminished state.

The Stoics, as we have seen above in Seneca’s Letter 116, reject erotics entirely for the proficiens.²⁰ Like the Epicureans, the Stoics attempt to forcibly separate pleasure, desire, and the act. They impose a schema of reasonable (constantiae) v. unreasonable (perturbationes, affectus) responses to stimuli (or impressions, or species).²¹ For the Stoics, every stimulus must be judged by innate human reason (or the hegimonikon). Seneca explains the process at Ep. 113.18:

Omne rationale animal nihil agit nisi primum specie alicuius rei incitatum est, deinde impetum cepit, deinde adsensio confirmavit hunc impetum. Quid sit adsensio dicam. Oportet me ambulare: tunc demum ambulo cum hoc mihi dixi et adprobavi hanc opinionem meam; oportet me sedere: tunc demum sedeo.

[No rational living thing does anything unless 1) it has been incited by the impression of something, 2) considered the impulse, 3) assent has confirmed this impulse. I will explain what assent is. It behooves me to walk. I do not walk until I have told myself this and I have approved this opinion. It behooves me to sit. I do not sit until I have told myself this and I have approved this opinion.]

The progression, then, is from species (an impression strikes the animus) to impulsum cepit (the animus considers the impulse),²² to adsensio (assent approves the impulse), to finally the activated impulse.

A psychological response in accordance with reason is termed a eupathy, a constantia. A psychological response which rejects reason is termed a passion, a

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²⁰ Whether the wise man could, and should, love was a matter of debate even among the ancients.

²¹ L&S 65.

²² Seneca seems on this point to diverge from the traditional Stoic view, which considers the proposition of the impulse to be embedded within the impression itself.
perturbatio (in Cicero) or an affectus (Seneca). Feelings of sexual pleasure and desire (amor), then, are affectus, and need to be extirpated from the life of a Stoic. In addition to the outright rejection of erotics as passions, Stoic doctrine separates pleasure and desire by again dividing each of the categories of eupathy and passion. Within each category there are two divisions, of pleasurable feelings v. painful feelings, and present event v. future event. Thus there are four passions: pleasure (voluptas), a feeling of elation at a present perceived good; desire (cupiditas, libido), a feeling of elation at a future expected good; pain (dolor), a feeling of shrinking back at a present perceived evil; fear (metus), a feeling of shrinking back at a future expected evil. The eupathies are similarly divided, but there is no present feeling of evil, since—the Stoics maintain—the eupathies are the feelings of a wise man, and the wise man never experiences evil. Thus the eupathies are: joy (gaudium), the rational belief of a present good; volition (voluntas), the rational belief of a future good; caution (cautio), the rational belief of a future evil. The fourfold division of the passions distinguishes pleasure and desire as a function of time: Stoic doctrine thus moves towards the isolation of the elements of the dynamic relationship between pleasure, desire, and the act.

And yet in Seneca we may observe some reintegration of the three. In Seneca pleasure is voluptas, and desire cupiditas. This terminology is to be contrasted


24 I refer here to the Stoic proficiens rather than the sapiens. The sapiens was thought to experience amor since with a perfected reason his amor was not in danger of becoming excessive.

25 Cicero provides the fullest account of the Stoic doctrine of passions and eupathies at Tusc. Disp. 3.24-5. See Graver’s (2002) trans. and esp. commentary of Tusc. Disp. 3-4 for good explication of this doctrine. Graver’s chart on p. 137 succinctly illustrates the relations between the four passions and the three eupathies. Brennan’s (2005) 110 charts are likewise excellent.

26 Rist’s (1989) survey of Seneca and Stoic orthodoxy determines that Seneca’s unorthodoxies are clustered in his account of psychology.
with Cicero’s in the *Tusculan Disputations*, where desire is *libido*. In Seneca *libido* is not absent, but plays a different role. *Libido* in Seneca is for the most part limited to the erotic sphere. Furthermore, *libido* more often than not means ‘pleasure’ rather than ‘desire’.\(^{27}\) Thus the terminology for desire in Cicero becomes in Seneca a specifically erotic term which blurs the distinct line between pleasure and desire drawn by doctrine. Moreover, Seneca anticipates Foucault: *cupiditas* (desire) increases as a result of being fulfilled.\(^{28}\) Pleasure leads to desire. He also reiterates the relationship in the reverse, and in a specifically Stoic fashion: the most permanent pleasure is to desire nothing.\(^{29}\) Desire for something leads us to seek it out and take pleasure in it, which does not satiate our desire—as Seneca says—but instead heightens it. And any desire or pleasure, according to Stoic doctrine, is to be avoided as a passion. Yet this formulation of a decrease in *cupiditas* as an increase in *voluptas* reiterates the dynamic relationship which doctrine seeks to sever. Seneca uses *voluptas* to describe the most permanent pleasure, whereas we would expect the term for the eupathy, *gaudium* (joy), rather than the passion, *voluptas*. In Seneca, then, there are indications that the dynamic relationship between pleasure, desire, and the act has reformed.

Throughout the history of ancient philosophy, then, erotics are either rejected (Aristotle, the Stoics) or domesticated (Plato, the Epicureans) as part of the ethical work of regulating the dynamic relationship. These two methods are, according to Butler, representative of the ways in which philosophies based on

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\(^{27}\) Of the 26 uses of *libido* in the *Epistulae Morales* only 8 mean “desire”, whereas the remainder mean “sexual pleasure”.

\(^{28}\) Ep. 73.2: *Numquam cupiditates illorum, quae crescent, dum implentur, exsatiet.*

\(^{29}\) Ep. 21.8: *si vis Pythoelea esse in perpetua voluptate, non voluptatibus adiciendum est, sed cupiditatibus detrabendum.* cf. Ep. 12.5: *aut hoc ipsum succedit in locum voluptatium, nullis egere. Quam dulce est cupiditates fatigasse ac reliquisse!*
reason have dealt with—for Butler—desire throughout the history of western philosophy:

Because philosophers cannot obliterate desire, they must formulate strategies to silence or control it; in either case, they must, in spite of themselves, desire to do something about desire. Thus, even the negation of desire is always only another one of its modalities. To discover the philosophical promise of desire thus becomes an attractive alternative, a domestication of desire in the name of reason, the promise of a psychic harmony within the philosophical personality.

Obliterate or domesticate. These are the two methods. And Butler observes that obliteration is but another form of desire. What this means for the Stoics, then, is that their rejection of erotics (pleasure and desire in particular) is, as Butler says, “another one of [the] modalities” of desire. Their desire is not to desire.

But I would like to demonstrate that there is domestication, too. In Seneca’s Letters we may observe an erotics which is employed in the service of reason. This erotics inculcates a desire for reason (ratio). The ordering of one’s life in accordance with reason is the primary tenet of Stoic ethics. And thus erotics becomes integral for the definition of a Stoic ethical subject.

I will examine the employment of erotics in the Letters in four chapters:

Chapter 2: The erotics of the text. I will trace how the text of the Letters becomes a site of erotic activity, and how relations between writer and reader become eroticized.

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30 Seneca points up this desire to not desire at Ep. 61.1: Desinamus quod voluimus velle. The pun voluimus / velle indicates that desire is thematized in this sentence, but the actual desiring—not-to-desire is expressed rather by the jussive desinamus. We may also supplement this Butlerian reading of Seneca with Freud’s theory of negation: that even as Seneca (or the Stoics in general) say “No desire” they still say “desire”, which by they recall and revive the presence of desire. For negation, see Freud (1925).

Chapter 3: The erotics of the medical metaphor. Seneca utilizes the traditional philosophy-as-medicine metaphor, but in doing so the practice of medicine becomes the practice of erotics, and Seneca-as-doctor also gets embroiled.

Chapter 4: The erotics of death. I will demonstrate how death is described throughout the *Letters* as a moment of immense pleasure, and as something to be desired.

Chapter 5: *Amor rationis*. I consider how *ratio* and *philosophia* are cast as impossible objects of desire, and the consequences and implications of such a structure.

This study will examine such aspects as Seneca’s writing style, his use of metaphor, his use of description, and his choice of genre. My methodology is for the most part literary. Yet I hope to draw philosophical conclusions. And that, I maintain, is what Seneca himself was doing: using literary style to do philosophy.

As a result this study will have more in common with John Henderson’s *Morals and Villas in Seneca’s Letters*—which reads the journey to the villa as a theme in the *Letters* with philosophical purpose—than with a more philosophically oriented approach, such as Brad Inwood’s *Reading Seneca*. There have also been in the last decade a sizeable number of studies on *eros* and sexuality within various aspects of the ancient world, including the philosophical: *The Sleep of Reason, Erotikon*. However, this study significantly differs from those in so far as it does not seek to reconstruct Seneca’s philosophical views on *amor*, but seeks rather to gain an understanding of how philosophy is structured through the employment of erotics. In short, the

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32 While I have tried to document fully the debts this study owes to Henderson’s work, in true Senecan fashion the calculation of said debt is impossible. In cases and places where he has not first navigated, his work has provided in-spiration to sally forth.

33 Indeed the former has already been aptly done by Inwood (1997).
question is not: “What does Seneca’s philosophy tell us about amor and erotics?” but: “What does the evocation of amor and erotics reveal about Seneca’s philosophy?” I hope, however, that this study may find an audience with both those who care about philosophy and those who care about eros. To the former I offer a way of reading Seneca’s philosophy which takes his literary style into account; to the latter I offer a way of understanding erotics as it is deployed for philosophical ends. In the office of Dr. Seneca, then, we may all learn how to stop worrying and love philosophy.

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34 Thus the spirit of my thesis has much in common with the second chapter of Schofield (1991), which investigates the role of eros in the structure of Zeno’s Republic.
CHAPTER 2

THE EROTICS OF THE TEXT

Writing about Seneca writing about writing seems a time-honored tradition among both ancients and moderns. And yet the criticism remains largely the same, that Seneca’s form and content are in conflict. This criticism is the predictable counterpart to allegations of Seneca’s ethical hypocrisy. Thus the tired old line on Seneca: A wealthy *eques*, Seneca espoused Stoic philosophy, but did not practice what he preached. In short, it alleges that Seneca’s life and philosophy are dissonant. Criticism of Seneca’s literary theory alleges the same, that practice and theory are dissonant. In both, furthermore, it is alleged that the content is sound, but form is given over to vice.

And yet Seneca was no fool, nor was he the failed politician and rebellious middle son of Seneca the Elder. Nor was he a careless writer. Rather, consideration

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1 Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.125ff.; Suetonius *Gaius* 53; Aulus Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 12.2; Marchant (1905); Guillemin (1954); Leeman (1963); Trillitzsch (1971); Kennedy (1972); Laureys (1991); Dominik (1997); Graver (1998). Indeed Williamson (1951) writes about English authors writing about Seneca’s writing.

2 Spectacularly misguided attempts to reform and reclaim Seneca result in the weakening of Seneca as an individual. That is, that Seneca was not a hypocrite, but simply lacked the fortitude to stick to his philosophy. Such studies include the infamous *OCD* entry by Barker from the first edition, and Ferguson (1972).

3 Here we may appreciate the extent to which literary / historical tropes have shaped Seneca’s legacy. I refer specifically to the following: the prodigal son, the relationship between birth order and personality, philosophy v. oratory, philosophy v. politics. Biographies of Seneca tend to inadvertently reinforce this easy characterization of Seneca: Griffin (1974) and (1976); Veyne (2003).

4 Seneca was so careful, indeed, that he anticipates the criticism of later generations: ‘*Aliter inquis loqueris, aliter vivis*’ (*De Vita Beata* 18.1).
of Seneca’s literary theory and practice reveals that Seneca foregrounds this issue: writing style and its execution are themes of the Letters. Thus this chapter will demonstrate that when Quintilian & Co. criticize Seneca for the contradiction between Seneca’s theory and practice of writing, they merely play into Seneca’s hands. That is to say, Seneca both discusses and stages the erotics of the text such that the likes of Quintilian may notice it. We may then observe that in Seneca reading and writing are figured as sites of erotic activity.

We will begin by examining Seneca’s most famous critic, Quintilian, and we will find in Quintilian the thematization of erotics in the discussion of writing style. Next, we will consider what Seneca himself writes about prose style in Letter 114. In it Seneca establishes a theory of rhetorical style through which the written text is analogous to its writer. We will then observe the ramifications of Seneca’s theory in Letter 46, in which Seneca takes on the role of reader to Lucilius' writer. We will find here the eroticization of the relationship between writer and reader. Finally, in Letter 59, we will explore how pleasure resides not only at the level of the Letters, but at the level of individual letter, that is, in the very act of signification. These various appearances of erotics in the text provide some initial indications of the paradoxes surrounding the Stoic rejection of erotics.

In Book Ten of the Institutio Oratoria Quintilian lodges his criticism of Seneca. His style, Quintilian charges, indulges in too many vices: *placebat propter sola vitia* (10.1.127). [The youth liked him on account of his vices alone.] Quintilian’s choice of *vitium* (a word with strong ethical connotations) to describe Seneca’s verbal

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5 Leeman (1963) 264-283, esp. 279-282 provides a thorough introduction to Seneca’s style within the classical v. modernist debate, with particular emphasis in the latter pages on Quintilian’s assessment of Seneca. Also: Alexander (1935); Culver (1967); Trillitzsch (1971) 61-69; Laureys (1991) 100-103 provides a history of the scholarship on the passage; Dominik (1997) revisits the classical v. postclassical (modernist) debate.
faults echo the ethical overtones of Quintilian's criticism. Seneca, he insinuates, is a
detriment not only to the rhetorical training of youths, but also to their ethical
training.

Here is the whole of Quintilian's assessment:

Ex industria Senecam in omni genere eloquentiae distuli, propter vulgatam falsa de me opinionem quo damnare eum et invisum quoque habere sum creditus. Quod accidit mihi dum corruptum et omnibus vitis fractum dicendi genus revocare ad severiora judicia contendo: tum autem solus hic fere in manibus adulescentium fuit.

Quem non equidem omnino conobar excutere, sed potioribus praeferr non sinebam, quos ille non destiterat incessere, cum diversi sibi conscient generis placere se in dicendo posse quibus illi placecent diffideret. Amabant autem eum magis quam imitabantur, tantumque ab illo defluebant quantum ille ab antiquis descenderat.

Foret enim optandum pares ac saltam proximos illi viro fieri. Sed placebat propter sola vitia, et ad ea se quisque dirigebat effingenda quae poterat: deinde cum se iactaret eodem modo dicere, Senecam infamabat.

Cuius et multae aliqui et magnae virtutes fuerunt, ingenium facile et copiosum, plurimum studii, multa rerum cognitio, in quo tamen aliquando ab iis quibus inquirenda quaedam mandabat deceptus est.

Tractavit etiam omnem fere studiorum materiam: nam et orationes eius et poemata et epistulae et dialogi feruntur. In philosophia parum diligens, egregius tamen vitiorum insectator fuit. Multae in eo claraeque sententiae, multa etiam morum gratia legenda, sed in eloquendo corrupta pleraque, atque eo perniciosissima quod abundant dulcibus vitis.

Velles eum suo ingenio dixisse, alieno iudicio: nam si aliqua contempsisset, si parum <recta> non concupisset, si non omnia sua amasset, si rerum pondera minuitissimis sententis non fregisset, consensu potius eruditorum quam puororum amore comprobaretur.

Verum sic quoque iam robustis et severiore genere satis firmatis legendus, vel ideo quod exercere potest utrimque iudicium. Multa enim, ut dixi, probanda in eo, multa etiam admiranda sunt, eligere modo curae sit; quod utinam ipse fecisset: digna enim fuit illa natura quae meliora vellet; quod voluit effecit. (IO.1.125-131)

[I have purposefully left out Seneca from the rest of the discussion on
style: because of widespread, but false, opinion, people believe that I
not only condemn him, but also despise him. This is the case because I

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6 cf. Gellius 2.12.12: Dignus sine Seneca videatur lectione ac studio studio adolescentium... Does Gellius allude to Quintilian here? After discussing Seneca’s assessments of Cicero and Vergil, in this final section Gellius turns to the education of youth (i.e. Quintilian IO 10) and sarcastically recommends the reading of Seneca. Gellius (like Quintilian) concludes that Seneca’s prose is unfit for adolescent consumption. If indeed Gellius alludes to Quintilian, the allusion is particularly brilliant, for he employs irony: he uses the same words as Quintilian, but means the exact opposite.

make it my task to subject a speaking style which is degenerate and ruined by all sorts of vice to strict judgment. As it was, he was nearly the only one whom the youths were reading. I certainly was not trying to ban him entirely; I was merely preventing him from being preferred to better authors. He did not stop criticizing them, since he knew that their style was different from his, and he was not confident that he would be able to please with his speaking style those whom the others pleased. Nonetheless, the youth loved him more than they imitated him, for they fell short of him as much as he of the ancients. If only they were his equals, or at least were akin to him. But they liked him on account of his vices alone, and it was to cultivating these as best they could that all the youths applied themselves. Then, when they would claim that they were speaking in the same way, they would do Seneca an injustice. He generally had many and impressive virtues: simple and plentiful talent; the greatest application of it; much factual knowledge. But sometimes he was misled by his sources. Still, he exercised control over nearly every subject of study: his oratory, poetry, letters, and dialogues are preserved. In philosophy, though he was not careful enough, he was nonetheless an exceptional persecutor of vice. He has composed many outstanding *sententiae*, and much that should be read for their moral content. But as for his rhetorical style, most of it is rotten. And his writings are so much the more dangerous because they are rife with sweet vices. If only he had spoken with his own talent, but another’s judgment. For if he had cast a critical eye on anything in his writing, if he had not been in love with all of his work, if he had not shattered the gravity of his thoughts into miniscule *sententiae*, he would have found approval in the esteem of learned men rather than in the adoration of schoolboys. But even so, he should be read by those who are already toughened and conditioned enough by harsher authors, perhaps because he will be able to train their judgment in both the pros and cons of style. For, as I said, there is much that is praiseworthy in him, much that is even admirable. Only let us take care in our selection; if only he himself had done this. For his disposition was worthy, would that he wanted for better; what he wanted, he accomplished.]

Quintilian says that he has saved his analysis of Seneca for last because people mistakenly believe that he hates Seneca. Rather, he implies that his opinion about Seneca is more complex. Quintilian explains that his work of holding rhetorical style up to a higher standard (*ad severiora iudicia*) has given people that impression. Throughout his assessment Quintilian refers to two general types (*genera*) of texts: 1) the rotten and degenerate (*corruptum, fractum*) and 2) the more proper (*severior*). Quintilian also sets forth a number of dyads: virtue / vice (*virtus / vitium*), innate
talent / judgment (ingenium / iudicium), and philosophy / eloquence (philosophia / eloquentia). Seneca’s work, it turns out, complicates Quintilian’s dyads, and in the end slides between the acceptable (more proper) and unacceptable (rotten and degenerate) types of text. This complication is in fact why Quintilian cannot discuss Seneca earlier: the reading of Seneca requires special instructions.

Quintilian grants that the content of Seneca’s work is valuable. All of the characteristics which Quintilian identifies as virtues refer to his content: ingenium facile et copiosum, plurimum studii, multa rerum cognitio. Seneca’s vices, accordingly, lie in his elocutionary style. Quintilian’s assessment of Seneca’s sententiae is exemplary of his ambivalence. He praises the quantity and quality of Seneca’s sententiae in the midst of praising Seneca as persecutor of vice (vitiorum insectator) and for his expression of ethical behavior (multa etiam morum gratia legenda). Thus Quintilian approves of the moral content of the sententiae. However, when he speaks of them again he states, si rerum pondera minutissimis sententiis non fregisset. This time Seneca’s sententiae are characterized as degenerate (fregisset > frango) style. As with the remainder of Seneca’s text, Quintilian concludes that Seneca’s philosophical content is laudable, but his elocutionary form is rotten.

Thus Seneca is problematic for Quintilian because Seneca’s virtues lie in his philosophy, his vices in his eloquence. Moreover, Seneca possesses ingenium, but untempered by iudicium. Ultimately Quintilian must prescribe different reading habits for boys and for men with respect to Seneca. Boys are not to read Seneca because they are keen on only the eloquence, the vice-ridden part: placebat propter sola vitia. In imitating only this portion they fall short of properly imitating Seneca, thereby giving Seneca a bad name: Senecam infamabat. Those who are allowed to read Seneca, in turn, are those whose rhetorical style has already been trained by the greats: iam robustis et severiore genere satis firmatis legendus. These readers not only stand
in a position to properly appreciate Seneca’s philosophical virtues, but also may exercise their rhetorical judgment on Seneca.

There is of course a markedly masculine aspect to all this talk of rhetorical training. The degenerate style is labeled *fractus*, that is, effeminate. In contrast proper (*severior*) rhetorical education literally turns boys (*pueri*) into learned men (*erudites*), toughened and conditioned (*robusti, firmati*). For these Seneca has the power (*potest*) to give them a workout (*exercere*). As for the boys, they are capable only of loving (*amabant*), imitating (*imitabantur*), and fawning over (*placebat*) Seneca. But it is only through exposure to harsher authors that boys may become tough men. Thus the pedagogical principle of *imitatio* is central to Quintilian’s vacillation regarding Seneca. Seneca is unsuitable to growing boys because, through imitating Seneca, they acquire the traits of Seneca’s rhetorical style. Just as harsher rhetorical builds tougher orators, degenerate (*fractum*) style builds degenerate (*fracti*) orators. Quintilian, then, is concerned not so much with Seneca’s own habits and whether Seneca was a hypocrite, but with the boys’ habits. It is not for Quintilian—*pace* Dominik (1997)—that “the style is the man”, but rather that the style makes or ‘breaks’ the boy into a man?*

The adoring, imitative boys and level-headed, critical Quintilian model two types of readers of Seneca. And we, too, are readers of Seneca. And we, too, are subject to Seneca’s *dulcia vitia*. These issues which Quintilian raises apply to us as well. This chapter, therefore, will address erotics’ relation to writing and reading.

We have considered, then, Quintilian’s assessment of Seneca as a writer. Let us turn to Seneca’s views on writing, after which we will consider Seneca as a reader.
In Ep. 114 Seneca explicates his theory of prose style. And it turns out to be surprisingly similar to Quintilian’s. But first, the letter seeks to anchor good prose style by intimately associating rhetoric with ethics and physics, such that the rhetorical, ethical, and physical bodies are equated. Seneca establishes this matrix in several moves throughout the letter. In §1 Seneca quotes a Greek saying: *talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita.* [As men’s lives, so men’s speech.] Speech equals lifestyle (*oratio = vita*). Then in §3, the physical body enters into the equation. The relationship of speech with the *animus*, Seneca claims, is analogous to the relationship of the body’s movements (*corporis motus*) to the *animus*. Seneca cites the effeminate man as an example: the effeminacy of his *animus* reveals itself in his actions (*corporis motus*) because the *animus* governs the body. Here, the behavior which the *animus* imposes upon the body (*corporis motus*) also stands in as another expression for *vita*. Thus, *oratio = vita / corporis motus*, and both *oratio* and *vita* may be understood as the means by which the *animus* governs a *corpus*, physical or rhetorical. Each of these relationships corresponds to a branch in Stoicism: *oratio* is the practice governed by rhetoric, and *vita* is governed by ethics. *Corpus*, as both physical and textual body, is the point of transfer for the rhetorical and ethical discourses. And both *corpora* reflect the *animus*. In this way *oratio* is aligned with *vita* in such a way that an affect in *oratio* reveals a fault in the *animus* which reveals itself also in the physical body, and vice versa.

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7 See also Epp. 40, 75, and 100 for Seneca on writing style. Marchant (1905) presents an overview of the primary evidence from the *Epistulae*. Kennedy (1972) 465-481 provides a good introductory overview of Seneca’s rhetorical style. Also: Motto & Clark (1993a). Wilson (1988) 108 provides a succinct and practical summary of “Senecan style”. Smiley (1919) is not to be trusted: the premise of the study is flawed, and it engages with Seneca only superficially.

8 Leeman (1963) 276-277 makes the claim slightly differently: “*talis oratio et vita, qualis animus.*” Nonetheless we are in agreement that the state of the *animus* affects both a man’s *vita* and his *oratio*.

9 Seneca often uses *corpus* in both textual and physical aspects, as we will observe in Ep. 46.
But Seneca has made a slight modification to the three traditional branches of Stoicism: logic, physics, ethics. In traditional Stoic doctrine, the verbal branch is represented by logic. For Seneca, however, oratio substitutes for ratio. That is, rhetoric has come to dominate logic. We may recall that such is Quintilian’s criticism of Seneca: Seneca squanders too much of his talent on verbal ornamentation.

This equation of the rhetorical body with the physical body is made all too explicit in §14: *Tam hunc dicam peccare quam illum: alter se plus iusto colit, alter plus iusto neglegit; ille et crura, hic ne alas quidem vellit.* [I’ll claim that one style of speech is as bad as the other: one immoderately fashions itself, while the other immoderately neglects itself; one plucks even his leghairs, the other not even his armpits.] The cultivation of prose style is the cultivation of the body: too much plucking results in effeminacy, not enough in crudeness. Thus one’s fashioning is written both on the page and on the body. That is, the effects of both one’s ethics (vita) and one’s rhetoric (oratio) are manifested in the physics (corpus).

We may observe in this relation of rhetoric, ethics, and physics Foucault’s Technologies of the Self. Foucault addresses the role of the Technologies of the Self in the relationship between ethics and physics. Aspects of askesis which regulate bodily physics aim to regulate ethical behavior, and vice-versa. The addition of rhetoric raises the stakes. One’s vices and faults are manifest now also in one’s speech. Any imperfection, then, is triply magnified. This threat provides incentive to

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10 See L&S 26 on the primary evidence of this tripartite structure.
11 Dialectic and rhetoric together comprise logic, but here dialectic has been shunted off the stage. Elsewhere in the Letters Seneca expresses disdain for logic puzzles and syllogisms (Epp. 82, 83, 87, 111).
12 Comparetti’s (1896) 37 remark is particularly delicious: “Seneca, who strove to wed the worst extravagances of rhetoric with philosophy, and yet, in spite of all his failings, startles us with his genius.
13 See Foucault (1986) esp. 39-68 and (1997) for more on the Technologies of the Self regarding the relationship between ethics and physics, particularly in Imperial Rome.
invest all the more ardently and carefully in the cultivation of one’s self. However, as with all aspects of the self which the Technologies posit as an ideal, the rhetorically perfect self is equally impossible to attain. And this impossibility prevents the attainment of the ideal ethical-physical-rhetorical self, encouraging the continued striving for it. In short, the perfect rhetorical body does not exist.

In §§4-8 Seneca provides a historical example of his schema. The famous Augustan-age patron Maecenas’ dissolute personality, he claims, is reflected both in his *vita* and in his *oratio*.

Maecenas’ lifestyle was effeminate: he left his tunic undone; he covered his head; he was accompanied by eunuchs (who, Seneca notes, were more man—*magis viri*—than Maecenas himself.) His speech was similarly loose and perverse: his words simply rolled out; he was not careful in arranging his words; but he also went overboard in his stylistics. As proof Seneca quotes line after line of Maecenas’ literary infelicities. Let us examine two phrases in detail.

One of Maecenas’ compositions exhibits a type of literary vice: *genium festo vix suo testem*. [Scarcely a guardian spirit as a witness on his own holiday.] This gold-plated line suffers from too much ornamentation. It unnecessarily places emphasis on the center term, the adverb *vix*. A too-ornate line is akin to the plucked leg: Maecenas has paid too much attention to the appearance of his phrase. Indeed, Seneca later refers to Maecenas’ style as exhibiting “*verba...tam contra consuetudinem posita*” (§7). Maecenas’ unmanly prose reflects his unmanly behavior.

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14 For the cultivation of the ideal rhetorical self, and its interdependency with the ideal physical and ethical selves, see Gleason (1995) and Gunderson (2000). Gunderson asserts the concurrent impossibility and desirability of the ideal rhetorical (ethical, physical) self.

15 *vita* / *vitia*: at §4 Seneca refers to Maecenas’ *vitia*. Here again we may observe Seneca’s pointed punning: as *oratio* stands in for *ratio*, similarly Maecenas’ *vitia* have become his *vita*.

16 Graver (1998) explores the gendered description of prose style (and, in particular, Maecenas’ style) in Ep. 114, and its grounding in Stoic psychology.
Another composition exhibits yet another sort of literary vice: *focum mater aut uxor investiunt*. [The mother or the wife clothes the hearth.] Here, Maecenas employs the trope of metaphor, or, more specifically, personification: he compares the hearth with a person through the verb *investiunt*. Seneca labels Maecenas’ unnecessary use of tropes as *deliciae*, a form of superfluous ornamentation: “*banc ipsum laudem suam corruptit istis rationis portentosissimae delicis*” (§7). [He ruined this great praise for his clemency with those tropes of the most monstrous imagination.] *Deliciae* have sexual implications as well: illicit sex. Maecenas’ indulgence in rhetorical *deliciae* characterizes his style as loose, appropriate for the man who “married a thousand times, though he had only one wife” (114.6).

In sum, there is a direct corollation between Maecenas’ *vita* and *oratio*: both are loose, effeminate, perverse. Seneca provides these quotations as proof of his claim that Maecenas’ *oratio* parallel his *vita*, and Maecenas himself is presented as an example of Seneca’s larger thesis of Ep. 114: *talis oratio qualis vita*. This thesis permits the text to stand for the man. In both the text and the man, lack of decorum and the improper use of *deliciae* are characterized as not only ‘not good’, but also ‘unmanly’.

But Seneca himself is also subject to his *oratio=vita* thesis. Quintilian criticizes Seneca of the same vices which Seneca finds in Maecenas and in others. At 114.11 Seneca states:

*Sunt qui non usque ad vitium accedent ... sed qui ipsum vitium ament.*

[There are those who do not verge upon vice, but who love vice itself.]

We may compare this statement to Quintilian’s observations of Seneca at IO 10.129–130:

*...abundant dulcibus vitis.*

*... si non omnia sua amasset.*

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For Quintilian, Seneca is one of those who write dissolute prose on account of his love of vice. And yet the same position is espoused by Seneca himself in Ep. 114. But Quintilian’s claim is not without provocation: as we will explore in more detail below, Seneca’s prose is itself rife with literary vice. Quintilian finds Seneca’s vices problematic primarily because they arouse love and imitation in young writers:

Amabant autem eum magis quam imitabantur, ... (10.126)
...puerorum amore comprobaretur. (10.130)

[But they used to love him more than they were able to imitate him,...]
[...he found approval in the love of boys.]

Seneca writes similarly of Sallust and of those who imitate him:

Haec vitia unus aliquis inducit, sub quo tunc eloquentia est, ceteri imitantur et alter alteri tradunt. ... Hoc Arruntius amare coepit; (114.17)

[One author introduces these vices, and it seems eloquent in his work and in his time. Then others imitate him, and they pass it on, one to another. ... Arruntius began to love this [esoteric phrase of Sallust].]

Before Quintilian observes it of Seneca, Seneca has already observed it of Sallust. The vocabulary is similar: the devotion aroused in the youth is termed amor / amare; the activity which results from adoration is imitation (imitare). As in Quintilian, there is in Ep. 114 a direct relationship between the vices of the text, imitation of the text, and love for its author. By paralleling Seneca to authors whom Seneca himself describes as full of literary vice, Quintilian accuses Seneca of literary vice on Seneca’s own terms. The concurrence of the pleasure of reading and the seduction of the reader which Quintilian observes are anticipated by Seneca in Ep. 114.

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18 Seneca even states that Sallust’s style is unusual in its use of *anputatae sententiae* (114.17), which reminds us of Quintilian’s chief stylistic criticism of Seneca: *minutissimae sententiae*. 
We may further observe the ramifications of the relationship between pleasure and reading as it affects the relationship between writer and reader in Ep. 46:


[I've received your book which you promised to send me, and I opened it with the plan of reading it at my leisure and I wanted only to taste a bit of it. But then it charmed me into reading more. So you can see from this how eloquent it is. I found it elegant, as if it were neither from my or your corpus, but at first glance it could have appeared to be a bit of Livy or Epicurus. But it captured me and drew me in with such sweetness that I read through it without pause. The sun was rising, my hunger was calling, the clouds were threatening; nonetheless I depleted the whole of it. I was not so much pleased as I was enraptured. It had such skill, and such soul! I would have exclaimed, “What an onslaught!” if it had given me any respite, if it had ebbed and surged. As it is, it was not so much an onslaught as a sustained assault. The diction is potent and divine, but there were moments of sweetness and gentleness. You're robust, you're resolute. I want you like this, and I want you to stay like this. Even the content was productive. So you should choose fruitful topics which both capture and arouse your talents.
I'll write more about your book when I've re-read it. Right now I don't have much criticism: it's as if I had had it read to me, rather than read it myself. And so let me examine it. You shouldn't be worried: you'll hear the truth. You're a lucky guy, since there's no reason for anyone to lie much to you! Unless, even though I've admitted that there's no reason to lie, I lie to you out of custom. Farewell.]
Seneca’s experience as a reader of Lucilius’ text is very much like the experience of reading Seneca’s text as Quintilian has described it. Seneca is thoroughly seduced by Lucilius’ charming book. The first section of the letter witnesses Seneca’s metamorphosis from critical reader to quivering lover. His initial intentions are to nibble at it at his leisure (ex commodo... degustare volui). However, his best intentions are undone the moment he cracks the book: it charms him into reading a bit more (deinde blanditus est ipse ut procederem longius). By now Seneca is done for: he is helplessly trapped by the book’s overwhelming charm, and cannot but race through it (tanta autem dulcedine me tenuit et traxit ut illum sine ulla dilatione perlegerim). The magnitude of the strength of the book (tanta) is juxtaposed with the utter lack of resistance available to Seneca (sine ulla): the scale of quantity is resolutely tipped in the book’s favor. In the next sentence, Seneca reports that not even the instincts of self-preservation (sol; fames; nubes) could halt his progress. In retrospect, then, Seneca’s declaration of his will (volui) is eclipsed and mocked by Lucilius’ text.

Lucilius’ book is supremely pleasurable. But what precisely about it arouses so much pleasure in Seneca? In Seneca’s words: nunc non fuit impetus sed tenor. Compositio virilis et sancta; nihilominus interveniebat dulce illud et loco lene. Grandis, erectus es. Lucilius’ text is a sustained attack, it is masculine, divine, grand, upright, and yet at times sweet and tender. It is the epitome of masculinity: aggressive and active, yet not overly much so. Furthermore, as Habinnek points out, it seduces Seneca through its smoothness and charm, thus characterizing it as a boy, the typical recipient of an

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19 In this observation I am preceded by Habinek’s (1998) 145-6 groundbreaking reading of the same passage. Edwards (2005) 88-90 similarly praises his reading. Wilson (1988) 104-107 also treats Ep. 46 at length. Alexander (1952) devotes an entire article to comparing and criticizing various translations of Ep. 46.1. And yet he never acknowledges that there is an erotic subtext here, and this despite saucy phrases in his translation: “slim figure,” “it gripped with its charm,” and the highly suggestive “I swallowed it ‘bottoms up’”.

20 The mockery is particularly poignant when juxtaposed with Quintilian’s praise of Seneca: quod voluit effect (I.O. 10.1.131).
older man’s affection. And yet, did Seneca not also call it *virilis* and *grandis*, characterizing it as the older lover? Moreover, how can this text be mistaken for both the suave Livy and the rough Epicurus? Described thus, the text is an oxymoron.\(^{21}\) It is no wonder that Lucilius’ text is never quoted or presented—for such a text cannot exist. Thus in Ep. 46 we may see Foucault and Gunderson’s assertions about the desirability and impossibility of the ideal rhetorical self borne out.

But it is not simply Lucilius’ book which is the epitome of masculinity. As Seneca states, *talis oratio qualis vita.* Lucilius, too, is the epitome of masculinity. The shift in grammatical and semantic subject from *compositio* to *tu* midway through the letter confirms this identification between textual *corpus* and physical *corpus.* As a result the literary encounter between text and reader becomes an erotic encounter between writer and reader, Lucilius and Seneca. In this encounter Seneca’s own masculinity is eclipsed and overpowered by Lucilius’ masculinity: Seneca is forced to endure Lucilius’ assault. But Seneca does not just enjoy it; he is enraptured by it (*non tantum delectatus sed gavisus sum*). Thus the initially active reader of the text is reduced to a passive position.\(^{22}\) Habindek puts it best: “Seneca the reader is not only penetrated by Lucilius the writer, but becomes a willing accomplice in the continuation and repetition of that act of intrusion.”\(^{23}\) And, as Habindek later notes, we, the reader of Seneca’s text, too are made to assume Seneca’s position of passive pleasure.

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\(^{21}\) Habindek allows his point regarding Seneca’s passivity to overshadow this strange status of Lucilius’ text.

\(^{22}\) Williams (1999) is still the most wide-ranging source for discussion on ‘homosexuality’ and masculinity in Rome. See esp. Chh. 4 & 5 (123–224) for the active v. passive antithesis. We should note, however, that Seneca’s formulation of reader-as-passive-partner does not easily conform to the patterns Williams identifies, and is thus an indication that Seneca is toying with convention. Walters (1997) and Bartsch (2005) treat masculinity in Roman philosophy specifically. Kaster (2002) examines the multivalent term *patientia.*

\(^{23}\) Habindek (1998) 145.
Moreover, precisely at the moment of Seneca’s ecstasy, he engages in an effeminate vice: “non tantum delectatus sed gavisus sum.” A sententia. It is not of the didactic or proverbial sort which also abound in Seneca, but a statement of fact. It nonetheless possesses the primary characteristics of a sententia: brevity and opposition. It is tightly structured by the correlatives non tantum ... sed, which divide the sentence into two units: non tantum delectatus || sed gavisus sum. Further, the correlatives structure the expectation of the sentence, that the second verb will differ from the first: “I not only did x, but I did this other thing y.” But Seneca does not deliver. Instead he presents as element y the same element as thing x, increased in magnitude. The reader expects potential dyads of: “not only did I enjoy it, but I learned from it,” or “not only did I enjoy it, but I felt anguish at it.” Thus the repetition of the same element is surprising. This element of surprise, combined with brevity and wordplay, characterizes Seneca’s sententiae. Seneca expresses his pleasure at a moment of emasculation through the effeminate employment of sententia. Furthermore, the genus of the sententia, that is, deliciae (tropes), is evoked in the sententia itself: delecto, etymological cousin of deliciae, tips us off to the trope.

But the second verb is troubling as well: gaudeo. Although gaudeo often refers to bodily—and specifically erotic—enjoyment, its usage here in that sense is surprising. For its substantive form, gaudium, is the Stoic term for the eupathy, joy. Thus Seneca’s vocabulary does not accord with his meaning: the feeling described would be characterized as voluptas by Stoics, but Seneca labels it gaudium. We will see more of this slippage below in Ep. 59.

24 Quintilian I.O. 8.5—the entirety of it about the construction and use of sententiae—notes that opposition in a sententia makes it particularly striking.
Thus far Seneca has presented two models which demonstrate the difficulty which reading presents to the extirpation of pleasure. Ep. 114 displays Maecenas’ body, seductive for its vices. Ep. 46 displays Lucilius’ body, the epitome of masculinity. Both the effeminate body and the masculine body seduce the reader. The very act of reading puts one in danger of experiencing pleasure.

Were these two threats not each horrifying enough for the reader, at the end of Ep. 114 Seneca presents a portrait of the paragon of vices, the pleasure-seeker who both seduces and is seduced:

Tunc illum excipiunt affectus inpotentes et instant; qui initio quidem gaudet, ut solet populus largitione nociturna frustra plenus et quae non potest haurire contractans; cum vero magis ac magis vires morbus exedit et in medullas nervosque descendere deliciae, conspectu eorum quibus se nimia aviditate inutillem reddidit laetus, pro suis voluptatibus habet alienarum spectaculum, sumministrator libidinum testisque, quarum usum sibi ingerendo abstulit. (114.24-5)

[Then incapacitating emotions seize the soul and menace it. At first it actually takes pleasure in it, like a populace when it is uselessly filled up with abundance destined to harm it, and it fondles whatever it cannot devour. But then, when sickness has increasingly devoured its strength and pleasures have sunken into the marrow and the tendons, it finds pleasure in watching those acts for which it has made itself useless through its overindulgence. Instead of its own pleasures it enjoys the spectacle of others’ pleasures as a supplier and witness of desires, since it has given up its own ability to enjoy them by piling them up.]

This passage tells the tale of bodily corruption: a few pleasures entice the body at first; the body grows addicted to these pleasures; the body wears itself out with pleasures. By this point in Ep. 114, the presence of the doubled body—physical, rhetorical—is undeniable. The term deliciae (‘physical pleasures’, but above also used of ‘tropes’) reminds us of the doubling. The tale of bodily corruption is also one of rhetorical corruption. This is the tale of reading an effeminate, vice-laden text; reading a text full of deliciae brings its reader pleasures. But, Seneca warns, there will come a time when these vices will no longer bring pleasure. At this point, the libertine changes the nature of his pleasure from directly experiencing the pleasure
to a voyeur’s pleasure: *pro suis voluptatibus habet alienarum spectaculum, sumministrator libidinum testisque*. [Instead of its own pleasures it enjoys the spectacle of others’ pleasures as a supplier and witness of desires.] The pleasure of providing and watching then comes to substitute for the pleasure itself.\(^{25}\) The voyeur’s pleasure reminds us of Seneca’s pleasure as reader in Ep. 46. The term *sumministrator* in particular reminds us of Seneca’s passive position in the encounter.\(^{26}\)

But the passage also recalls Seneca’s general posture throughout the *Epistulae Morales*, without specific reference to Ep. 46 or 114. That is, Seneca himself appears as the libertine who enjoys using *deliciae* in his writing. And he also takes his pleasure in reading the *deliciae* of others, quoting / reading line after line of Maecenas’ vices.

The dangers of reading abound. Various models of reading have been presented to us: reading Maecenas’ effeminate writing and being feminized ourselves; reading Lucilius’ manly writing and being emasculated; and then there is the libertine. None of these allow for an acceptable relationship with pleasure. All three expose the reader to pleasure through the eroticization of the text. This eroticization of the text is then transferred to an eroticization of the relations between writer and reader, thereby embroiling every reader of Seneca—us—in the

\(^{25}\) This extension of the experience of pleasure to include the voyeur’s pleasure may also be observed at *Naturales Quaestiones* 1.16. Hostius Quadra uses magnifying mirrors to watch himself assuming the passive role in sexual activity: *ut ipse flagiti ornamentum spectator esse* [...to be a spectator to his own vices]. Seneca places emphasis on Hostius Quadra’s voyeuristic pleasure throughout the passage with the vocabulary of viewing. Walters (1998) 302-303 pursues this strain of analysis. Leitão (1998) places the passage within the broader philosophical context of *NQ* Book 1; also Kaster (2002); Bartsch (2006) 103-114 focuses on the viewing of the self and its stakes for ethics. Barton (1993) 93-94 asserts that for the Romans the eye was paradoxically at once aggressive and vulnerable. Bartsch (2006) 87-123 expounds on Barton’s work. To marshal the contemporary theories concerning viewing and the gaze are beyond the bounds of this study, but it suffices to say that Barton’s observations about the eye-in-viewing are applicable to the eye-in-reading. That is, just as the *sumministrator* is compromised by viewing the spectacle of others’ pleasures, the reader is compromised by reading precious prose.

\(^{26}\) Recall esp. Habilnék’s phrase: “a willing accomplice in the continuation and repetition of that act of intrusion.”
same erotic, pleasurable, and thus decidedly unStoic relations as Maecenas-Seneca, Lucilius-Seneca, and Seneca-\textit{pueri}.\textsuperscript{27}

Elsewhere in the \textit{Epistulae Morales} we find that pleasure is aroused not only in the interchange of epistolary letters (\textit{litterae}) as in Ep. 46, but also in the interchange of the letters of the alphabet (\textit{litterae}). Ep. 59 begins much like Ep. 46, at Seneca’s exclamation of pleasure, but moves in a different direction: while Ep. 46 reveals pleasure at the macro-level of the letter, Ep. 59 reveals it at the micro-level. Pleasure itself, we will find, is not easy to define.

In Letter 59 Seneca once again takes pleasure in Lucilius’ prose:\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{quote}
Magnam ex epistula tua percepit voluptatem; permitte enim mihi uti verbis publicis nec illa ad significacionem Stoicam revoca. Vitium esse voluptatem credimus. Sit sane; ponere tamen illam solemus ad demonstrandum animi hilarem adfectionem. Scio, inquam, et voluptatem, si ad nostrum album verba derigimus, rem infamem esse et gaudium nisi sapienti non contingere; est enim animi elatio suis bonis verisque fidentis. Vulgo tamen sic loquimur ut dicamus magnum gaudium nos ex illius consulatu aut nuptiis aut ex partu uxoris percepisse, quae adeo non sunt gaudia ut saepe inuida futurae tristitiae sint; gaudio autem iunctum est non desinere nec in contrarium verti. Itaque cum dicit Vergilius noster

\begin{quote}
et mala mentis
gaudia,
\end{quote}

diserte quidem dicit, sed parum proprie; nullum enim malum gaudium est. Voluptatibus hoc nomen inposuit et quod voluit expressit; significavit enim homines malo suo laetos. Tamen ego non inmerito dixeram cepisse me magnum ex epistula tua voluptatem; quamvis enim ex honesta causa inperitus homo gaudeat, tamen affectum eius inpotentem et in diversum statim inclinaturum voluptatem voco, opinione falsi boni motam, inmoderatem et inmodicam. Sed ut ad propositum revertar, audi quid me in epistula tua delectaverit: habes verba in potestate, non effert te oratio nec longius
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} Edwards (2005) 90 asks a similar question: “And while we do not get to read Lucilius’ seductive prose, as readers of Seneca’s work are we not implicitly invited to put ourselves in the subordinate position Seneca claims to be adopting in relation to that of Lucilius—with his own writings taking the role of seducer?” Edwards posits the question as a rhetorical question, thus stopping short of exploring the full ramifications of such a position.

quam destinasti trahit. Multi sunt qui id quod non proposuerant scribere alicuius verbi placentis decore vocentur, quod tibi non evenit: pressa sunt omnia et rei aptata; loqueris quantum vis et plus significas quam loqueris. Hoc maioris rei indicium est: apparet animum quoque nihil habere supervacui, nihil tumidi. (59.1-5)

[I felt great pleasure from your letter. Let me speak casually, and don’t subject the words to Stoic definitions. We think that pleasure is a vice. So be it; but nonetheless we usually use this word to express a cheerful mood of the soul. I know, and I admit it, that if we line up the words in our register, that pleasure is a disreputable business, and that joy befalls none but the wise. This is because it is an elation of a soul which entrusts itself to its own goodness and truth. Nonetheless, we commonly speak in such a way that we say that we experienced great joy at his consulship, or at a marriage, or at childbirth. But these experiences are not joys in so far as they are often the beginnings of future sadness; it is integral to joy that it never cease nor change in fortune. So when Vergil says:

“and the wicked joys of the mind”

he certainly speaks eloquently, but not very precisely, since there is no such thing as wicked joy. He has imposed this name for “pleasures” and expressed what he wanted, since he meant “men pleased with their own wickedness”. But still, I had not without reason said that I experienced great pleasure from your letter. For although an uneducated man may experience joy from a worthy source, I still term his emotion which is uncontrolled and grasping every which way at once “pleasure”, since it happens through an impression of a false good, and since it is unrestrained and excessive. But, to return to the topic at hand, this is what delighted me in your letter: you have control over your words, your prose doesn’t carry you away, nor does it drag you further than you intended. There are many writers who are drawn to a topic about which they had not intended to write by the beauty of some pretty word; but you didn’t do this. Every bit of it is concise and appropriate to the topic; you say as much as you want, and you mean more than you say. This testifies to a rather good piece: it is evident that your soul too contains nothing superfluous, and nothing arrogant.]

The letter begins with Seneca’s declaration of pleasure at Lucilius’ text: magnam ex epistula tua percepisti voluptatem. But this gets him into trouble with Stoic terminology: permite enim mihi uti verbis publicis nec illa ad significationem Stoicam revoca. Seneca notes that there are two definitions (significationes) for voluptas. He reports that gaudium similarly has two definitions: the common and the Stoic. And by referring to both discourses, Seneca makes both meanings “active”. This doubled discourse can result in confusion, Seneca claims: people say voluptas when they mean


gaudium, and vice-versa. He provides Vergil as an example. He criticizes Vergil's usage of gaudium in the phrase et mala mentis gaudia (59.3). This usage is incorrect, Seneca states, because there is no such thing as a malum gaudium: nullum enim malum gaudium est. Gaudium is an unqualified good. Vergil means to say voluptas, but has used gaudium in its place: Voluptatibus hoc nomen imposuit. But he, he asserts, has not confused the two when he proclaimed his voluptas:

Tamen ego non inmerito dixeram cepisse me magnam ex epistula tua voluptatem; quamvis enim ex honesta causa inperitus homo gaudeat, tamen affectum eius inpotentem et in diversum statim inclinaturum voluptatem voco, opinione falsi boni motam, inmoderatam et inmodicam.

[But still, I had not without reason said that I experienced great pleasure from your letter. For although an uneducated man may experience joy from a worthy source, I still term his emotion which is uncontrolled and grasping every which way at once "pleasure", since it happens through an impression of a false good, and since it is unrestrained and excessive.]

His usage of voluptas is correct because he, unlike the uneducated fool, does not use gaudium to mean voluptas: the uneducated man uses gaudium because the feeling originates from a morally acceptable (ex honesta causa) source. Instead, Seneca terms this feeling voluptas because it is based on false judgment, is uncontrolled, and because of its intensity and extent.

Earlier in the letter Seneca had explicated the difference between the Stoic definitions for voluptas and gaudium and its common-speak counterparts. Here he reiterates this difference in different terms: the common man (inperitus homo) calls a feeling gaudium, though Seneca knows that the feeling is actually voluptas (voluptatem voco). How, then, does this statement explain Seneca's usage of voluptas at the letter's opening? We may recall that the sentence begins "I properly used the word voluptas; because (enim)." Presumably, the logic is that the feeling which he felt at Lucilius' letter was this voluptas which the common man would refer to as gaudium. This explanation seems fine and good until we read Seneca's description of this voluptas:
adfectum eius inpotentem et in diversum statim inclinaturum voluptatem voco, opinione falsi boni motam, inmoderatam et inmodicam. Because this emotion is attributed to the uneducated man (eius), we are not initially disturbed by this depiction of out-of-control emotion. But, if we commit ourselves to the explanatory force of enim, we are intractably brought to this consequence: the road of rhetoric and logic leads to a brothel. Enim demands that we apply this definition to Seneca’s voluptas, that we read adfectum eius as adfectum meum. “My voluptas is uncontrolled and grasping every which way at once,” “my voluptas arises from an impression of a false good,” “my voluptas is unrestrained and excessive.” This Seneca is beginning to sound less like the philosopher who chastises others for the incorrect definitions of words, and more like the voracious consumer of pleasure from Ep. 46. Seneca defines voluptas as an adfectus inpotens and this is precisely what we observe in Ep. 46. Inpotens at once describes both voluptas and its effect on Seneca: it is too powerful to be controlled, and yet it also renders Seneca powerless as it infects Seneca with its uncontrollable urge. Moreover, we will recall that the same pleasure of Lucilius’ work is termed gaudium in Ep. 46: Non tantum delectatus sed gavisus sum. Seneca has used two terms to describe his pleasure, the charge which he has levelled against the uneducated.

What is the feeling which Seneca feels in Ep. 46? Is it voluptas, or is it gaudium? And which discourse is Seneca employing there, Stoic or popular? Seneca does not tell us. What Seneca does indicate to us in Epp. 46 and 59 is the difficulty of maintaining the distinction between voluptas and gaudium. It is not just the imperitus homo, or Vergil, who cannot properly define voluptas / gaudium, but also Seneca himself. Nor is it a purely verbal difficulty: by calling his emotion gaudium in Ep. 46, Seneca does not make it gaudium. Thus Seneca demonstrates that the Stoic dictum of extirpating voluptas is more complex and difficult than a change in the vocabulary.
Furthermore the problem of *significatio* is not limited to *voluptas* / *gaudium*. Rather, this problem is inherent to the act of signifying, to words themselves. In Ep. 59 Seneca praises Lucilius for having control of his words (*habes verba in potestate*), but also for meaning more than he says (*plus significas quam loqueris*). That is, Lucilius has control over his words, but the meanings still outnumber the words themselves. This is the problem of language. And Vergil’s quotation from Ep. 59 contributes to this problem. Seneca states that Vergil made his meaning clear (*quod voluit expressit*), but to the detriment of the word *gaudium*, whose definition he perverts with the adjective *mala*. According to Seneca, Vergil could—and should—have written *voluptates*. That language is flexible enough to adapt to Vergil’s addition also causes these problems of signification. The ratio between what Lucilius and Vergil say, and want to say, is never equal. This inequality gives rise to the problems of signification.

Moreover, these problems of signification are related to the very tropes / figures of speech which both Quintilian and Seneca identify as a component of dissolute speech. Metaphor, a trope which Seneca finds particularly offensive in Maecenas’ text, is a function of the multiple and flexible definitions for a word. As Quintilian defines it, metaphor (*translatio*) is when a word is transferred (*transfertur*) from where it belongs (*in eo loco quo proprium est*) to elsewhere (*IO 8.6.5*). The word creates meaning in its new context only because of its multiple or flexible meanings. And though Seneca criticizes Maecenas for his overuse of metaphor, we find the most egregious example in Seneca himself:

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29 Notice the recurring theme of *potestas*: Lucilius has his words *in potestate*, while Seneca’s *voluptas* is *inpotens*. This issue, too, is a component of the masculine-as-the-good rhetoric in prose style.

30 In Ep. 40 Seneca similarly directs Lucilius to be careful to prevent his words from running out of control: *temperanda sunt* (*40.13*).

31 Notice the wordplay: Seneca observes that Vergil writes *mala gaudia* to express *voluptates*. Thus Vergil was writing pleasures (*voluptates*) in writing as he pleased (*quod voluit*).
Seneca begins with a slavery metaphor: *alligant* and *debilitant* are words drawn from the vocabulary of slavery which Seneca inserts here in the place of verbs which express ethical harm. He then changes the metaphor to one of bathing: *iacuimus, elui*. He then shifts this to a metaphor about dye-ing: *inquinati, infecti*. Guilty as charged. Seneca not only utilizes metaphor, he uses many at once, mixing and sliding amongst his metaphors. And he is not unaware of his rhetoric. He admits that he is traversing (*transeamus, cf. translatio*) from one figure to another. Thus Seneca depicts himself breaking his own rules of rhetoric. This is not the first time we have observed this in this chapter. In Ep. 46, we may recall, we examined one instance of the *sententia*. Is Quintilian correct after all, then? Is Seneca just as rotten as Maecenas?

Quintilian’s main criticism of Seneca is that Seneca overuses *sententiae*, and that this practice leads to pleasure. This specific criticism is part of Quintilian’s larger point that the over-usage of tropes arouses pleasure. But Quintilian does not explain exactly how the arrangement of words arouses pleasure. For this we must turn to semiotics and psychoanalysis, and Lacan’s merging of the two. In “The Agency of the Letter in Unconscious or Reason Since Freud,” Lacan incorporates both the theories of Saussure and Freud when he discusses the pleasure of a specific trope, metaphor. Lacan asserts that metaphor’s pleasure lies in its ability to alter the

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32 For thorough studies of Seneca’s metaphors, including a catalogue, see Smith (1910) and Armisen-Marchetti (1989).

relationship between signifiers—here, words. When one word is put (Quintilian’s *transfertur*) in the place proper to another word (*in eo loco quo proprium est*), a mental leap is required in order to constitute meaning, accounting for the replacement of one word for another.\(^{34}\) This leap gives rise to the creative or poetic “spark” which makes metaphor pleasurable. Moreover, a string of metaphors—what Lacan metaphorically calls a “continuous stream, a dazzling tissue of metaphors”—is capable of creating the greatest creative spark, the greatest pleasure.\(^{35}\) We may appreciate that this ‘tissue of metaphors’ is what Seneca has created in the quotation above from Ep. 59.

Nor is the pleasure of the *sententia* very different from the pleasure of metaphor. Like the pleasure of metaphor, the pleasure of the *sententia* arises from the mental activity of interpretation, or, as Lacan paraphrases Freud, “at the precise point at which sense comes out of non-sense.”\(^{36}\) For *sententia*, like metaphor, functions through words thwarting reader expectation, e.g. by repetition, opposition, surprise, and comparison.\(^{37}\) In turn the reader re-evaluates the meaning to compensate for the thwarted expectation. For Lacan, the constitution of meaning, this “making sense out of non-sense,” is an intellectual pleasure. For Quintilian and Seneca, this pleasure of metaphor has more wide-ranging consequences. Because rhetoric, ethics, and physics are so closely interrelated for Quintilian and Seneca, rhetorical pleasure (*delicia*) becomes for them also ethical vice (*vitium*) and physical pleasure (*voluptas*).

\(^{34}\) Lacan (1977) 164.

\(^{35}\) Ibid. 157.

\(^{36}\) Ibid. 158.

\(^{37}\) Quintilian *IO* 8.5.18, 5, 15, and 19, respectively.
It is then only fitting that the rhetorical term which both Quintilian and Seneca use for tropes is *deliciae*. Generically anything which brings pleasure, in the discourse of rhetoric *deliciae* are specifically words which bring pleasure. And in this appellation we may observe an interesting snapshot in the ideology of oratory and Stoic philosophy. *Delicia* is commonly used in love elegy as a source of pleasure; but there, *deliciae* are specifically people—women—who bring pleasure. In elegy, then, pleasure is found in the body of woman. In oratory, in contrast, this pleasure is found in language. And, moreover, while the pleasure of woman is longed for and sought after in love elegy, in Quintilian the pleasure of the word is not to be sought, and used only sparingly and with great care. This attitude towards pleasure echoes the more severe belief of Stoic philosophy on pleasure. Thus we can observe in Seneca a triangulation with Quintilian and Catullus in his usage of *delicia*. Like Quintilian, Seneca states that rhetorical *deliciae* are not to be overused (114.7). And like Catullus, Seneca has his own elegiac *delicia*: “Felicio...deliciolum tuum” (12.3). But Seneca rejects this *deliciolum* just as he rejects the rhetorical *deliciae*. What, then, should we make of Seneca’s use of rhetorical *deliciae*? In this, too, we may see a predecessor in Catullus. In c.16 Catullus castigates Furius and Aurelius for assuming that Catullus’ soft verses represent a soft man (*me ex versiculis meis putastis, / quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum*). Like Catullus’, Seneca’s writing style is disjointed from his person. As Catullus insists upon his manliness despite his voluptuous verses, Seneca similarly insists upon his rhetorical manliness despite his use of *deliciae*. Both c. 16 and Ep. 114 explore the relationship between the man and his writing. While their starting points are

38 In Ep. 12, Seneca returns to his country villa and is greeted by a host of (he claims) strangers, among whom is Seneca’s one-time darling, the now aged Felicio. Letter 12 stages Seneca’s abnegation of his *deliciolum* Felicio and a turn towards the more reasonable joys of old age. But these joys are actually called *voluptates*: again the problem of terminology.

39 See Fitzgerald (1993) 49-55, esp. 255 n.38, in which Fitzgerald likens Seneca’s seduction in Ep. 46 to the forced penetration of Furius and Aurelius, paying particular attention to the passive role of the reader in both.
diametrically opposed, the two works pose the same difficulty for the reader. In Ep. 114, Seneca establishes that the style is the man, and yet uses dissolute style. In c. 16, Catullus claims that style has no relation to the man, and yet makes a personal threat through his poetry (*pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*). The paradoxical riddle of c. 16 has been well explored. Richlin notes that Catullus’ threat is paradoxical in so far as to carry it through would negate Catullus’ claim to be *castus* and *pius*.\(^{40}\) Batstone identifies two strains of reading in the poem, the ‘literal’ (to which Richlin’s belongs) and the ‘figurative’, in which the threat is poetic.\(^{41}\) Both of these readings, Batstone claims, are always at play throughout the poem, and the reader’s understanding of the poem vacillates between the two: either the threat is personal, and Catullus is no *pius poeta*, or the threat is poetic, and Catullus is again asserting the distinction between the poet and his verses—but in poetic verse. C. 16, like Ep. 114, leads to a logical impasse. Both works problematize the relationship between the writer and his works. Moreover, Seneca’s meaning seems to be in conflict with his words, particularly when he espouses the prudent use of metaphor, then knowingly produces a ‘tissue of metaphors’. That is, Seneca espouses abstention from *deliciae*—both as tropes and pleasures—in language that is full of *deliciae*—both tropes and pleasures. But this is not to say that Seneca is a hypocrite. Rather, Seneca’s staging of these difficulties demonstrates the potential dangers involved in engaging with a text.

Seneca thereby correlates texts and pleasures even as Ep. 114 warns against just such a fusion. Ep. 114, in its prescriptions for prose style, espouses the rejection

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of erotics in the pursuit of the ideal. And yet Ep. 46 demonstrates that erotics are inevitable in the activity of reading and writing, and that reading arouses love for its author. Ep. 59 reveals that the bonds between words and their definitions are slippery, and, moreover, that the terms *voluptas* and *gaudium* are no exception. From this flexibility of words and language arises the pleasure of tropes: both metaphor and the *sententia* arouse pleasure. Seneca not only demonstrates that the text is a dangerous place for erotics, but also that readers of his text become embroiled in these relations, and are asked to play a part in the play of words between Seneca, Lucilius, and Quintilian. Moreover, Seneca has staged the play in such a way that we are not immediately informed of the plot. That is, Seneca never explicitly tells us that engaging with a text will pose a problem for our ethics. Both Quintilian and his boys are thus ‘bad readers’ of Seneca who fail to appreciate the full scope of the problems of reading Seneca: the boys, because they fall in love with Seneca; Quintilian, because he stops short of recognizing the full extent of the problem. One must, as it turns out, read quite a bit of Seneca before one appreciates that there is in Seneca a fundamental problem with reading. Reading in the order of the letters—and reading this chapter in reverse—it is only after the seductions of Epp. 46 and 59 that we are told in Ep. 114 what Maecenates, what connoisseurs of vice, we have become. Only then may we reflect upon the inevitability of our seduction and the dangers inherent to reading.
CHAPTER 3

THE EROTICS OF THE MEDICAL METAPHOR

In Chapter 2 we have seen how the little darlings of rhetoric (deliciae) play an important role in the seduction of the reader. Maecenas and Lacan have together demonstrated the dangers of metaphor: write metaphors, and we may end up dissolve and effeminate; read metaphors, and we are no safer. Let us then read more metaphors. In this chapter metaphor will take center stage.

Metaphor has commonly been considered the domain of poetic interpretation: a literary device employed to enhance the texture of the language or to clarify an idea. As a result, some scholars claim, Seneca’s metaphors collapse when forced to their logical conclusion. However, recent work in metaphor has demonstrated that it functions at a fundamental psychological level, prior to poetic fashioning. Lakoff and Johnson asserted that the use of metaphor in the English language reveals that underlying metaphorical concepts structure thought. Nussbaum and Inwood have both independently traced this primacy of psychological metaphor in ancient thought. Nussbaum notes that both Aristotle and Chrysippus

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1 There are strains of discontent in Edwards (1997) and Too (1994), but neither are as polemical and unsympathetic as Lavery (1980) 155, who writes of Seneca’s war and travel metaphors: “in the final analysis, because of his uncertainty about the after-life and his endorsement of self-destruction, [Seneca] himself retreats ideologically from the battle and from the journey.” Lavery thus links the ‘failure’ of the metaphors with death. This chapter and the next will address Lavery’s concerns and demonstrate that, while Lavery’s observation is correct, the ‘failure’ is not accidental but rather reflects the relationship between words and ethics in Seneca’s philosophy.

2 Lakoff & Johnson (1980).
analyze ordinary speech because they (Chrysippus in particular) believe that common speech discloses a truth which may be obfuscated by excess verbiage. Inwood applies such a Chrysippean analysis of language to the language of Chrysippus himself. Inwood analyzes the expression—which works in both Greek and English—of “falling” in love. The metaphor of walking and falling reveals that the Stoics conceived of love such that “once this process begins, ‘we’ can do no more.” The use of metaphor, then, is not simply for the benefit of clarifying the issue for the reader, but also structures the space in which the philosopher thinks through his ideas.

The psychological aspect of metaphor is reflected in Armisen-Marchetti’s studies on Seneca’s use of metaphors. While she recognizes that Seneca employs metaphor for the purpose of defining a concept new to Roman philosophy, or to flesh out a concept more fully, she also identifies that metaphor is used to structure the fundamental ways in which philosophical concepts are understood. Her analysis of the soul as a finite and bound space recalls Lakoff and Johnson’s analysis of the almost unconscious proliferation of spacial expressions in everyday speech. She also notes that among metaphors of this type the greatest convergence between the metaphor and the metaphorized takes place in the “health of the soul is the health of the body” metaphor or, as I term it, the “philosophy is medicine” metaphor. This metaphor will be the specific focus of this chapter.

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5 Ibid. 66.  
8 Armisen-Marchetti (1991) 124. It is already evident in my rewording of the metaphor that we are not speaking of a single metaphor but rather of a whole nexus of metaphors, the various elements of which will be articulated below.
But first perhaps we should see what Seneca himself says about metaphor. As we have seen from his assessment of Maecenas’ metaphors in Ep. 114, Seneca rejects excessive or over-stretched metaphors. Indeed, throughout the *Letters* Seneca asserts that it is not metaphor of which he disapproves, but of inappropriate usage. There is, moreover, one metaphor which Seneca wholeheartedly supports:

Sed ne et ipse, dum aliud ago, in philologum aut grammaticum delabar, illud admoneo, auditionem philosophorum lectionemque ad propositum beatae vitae trahendum, non ut verba prисca aut ficta captemus et translationes inprobas figurasque dicendi, sed ut profutura praecepta et magnificas voces et animosas quae mox in rem transferantur. (108.35)

[But I’m afraid that I, too, will slip into the role of a philologist or a grammarian while I’m preoccupied with something else. So let me tell you this: hearing or reading philosophy should be applied to the goal of leading a good life, not to collecting archaisms and neologisms, or shameless metaphors and other tropes, but to collecting helpful precepts and splendid, energetic sayings so as to then translate them into actions.]

Metaphors can be shameless (*inprobas*) and the collection of metaphors pointless, but the real metaphorical work takes place in the transfer of words (*praeepta, voces*) into deeds (*rem*). That is to say, in the work of ethics. Thus the *Letters*, despite being crammed full of literary metaphors, nonetheless takes seriously the master-metaphor of transferring the language of philosophy to actions of philosophy. In short, as Seneca writes, “faciant quae dixerint” (108.39) [let’em walk their talk].

But let us not slip into the role of a philosopher just yet. We will return at the end of the chapter to the ethical ramifications of this formulation of metaphor, but for now we will play the philologist / grammarian and collect up the shameless

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9 Epp. 59.6; 108.35; 114.5; 114.10.

10 Emphases are mine.

11 For ontological and political readings of this motto and Ep. 108 see Gunderson (2006) and Too (1994), respectively. Both are, naturally, also interested in ethics as/of metaphor.
“philosophy is medicine” metaphor. Shameless, indeed, for in the end this familiar Stoic metaphor is overturned and ceases to be the comfortable old standby, but conversely becomes a site of erotics, and thus philosophical problematization.

Medicine as a metaphor for philosophy is not a new formulation in Seneca. Rather, as Martha Nussbaum has shown, this metaphor was already well-established by Seneca’s time. In The Therapy of Desire Nussbaum traces the utilization of this metaphor in Hellenistic ethical philosophy. Already in Homer, Nussbaum notes, logos was described as a form of therapy. Among the Epicureans the role of the philosophical teacher as doctor was greatly enhanced: Epicurus was treated as a god, and the teacher and his precepts were primary doctrines. And at last she winds her way to Seneca:

For in the greatest body of surviving Stoic therapeutic writing, his Epistulae Morales, he creates, within the written text, an intimate personal dialogue between teacher and pupil. Situating both his own fictionalized persona and that of the interlocutor Lucilius very concretely, in relation to their ages, to the seasons of the year, to events of many kinds, showing the teacher’s intimate responsiveness to the pupil’s thought and feeling, Seneca shows the reader what it is like for philosophy to be an “inside” business. ... Seneca’s responses are fully personal and non-authoritarian, full of loving concern for Lucilius’ whole life.

I disagree with much of this. Indeed I can barely recognize this “Seneca” of whom she speaks. Nussbaum whitewashes Seneca and turns him into a caricature. Her Seneca is the kind old grandfather who comes to the door with cookies. I believe, rather, that Seneca is far more elusive, coming to the door alternately as “Catullus”,

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12 Nussbaum (1994).
13 Ibid. 49.
14 Ibid. 119-136.
15 Ibid. 337-338.
the student himself, death warmed over, or philosophy herself (Chapters 2-5, respectively). Thus in this chapter I will demonstrate how Seneca makes his rounds as doctor and takes his turn as patient. In contrast to Nussbaum’s assessment, moreover, the Letters are not the rule of medical therapy, but the exception: they portray not the successful completion of therapy, but rather the dangers inherent to stripping down before the good doctor.

In order to fully document Seneca’s unusual use of the metaphor, we will begin by examining the body of evidence for Seneca’s usage of the metaphor in its more traditional form, then explore Seneca’s own formulation of the metaphor and its consequences.\(^\text{16}\)

The fullest articulation of the metaphor occurs in Letter 95: in an explanation of philosophical method Seneca connects the history of philosophy with the history of medicine and supplies an aetiology of sorts for the metaphor. At 95.14 Seneca responds to criticism about the contemporary state of philosophy. He imagines that his objector finds fault with the complex nature of current philosophy as compared to the days of old when wisdom was uncomplicated. Seneca agrees, but attributes the change to an increase in the magnitude and prevalence of the morally reprehensible behavior to be corrected: more intricate vices call for more intricate philosophy.

The same, he claims, is true for the field of medicine (95.15). The metaphor begins to take shape: medicine was once the knowledge of a few herbs, but the development of more, and more complex, ailments incited the growth of medicine to its current complexity. To flesh out the metaphor more fully, then, we may deduce

\(^{16}\) The medical metaphor is arguably the most pervasive and most insistently evoked of all of Seneca’s metaphors. I will therefore treat only the most important passages for my argument. A thorough collection of the occurrences of the metaphor can be found in Armisen-Marchetti (1989) 132-135 and 136-138.
that both disciplines have as their aim the improvement of human life, and accomplish this through the application of remedies which cure what ails us.

Again at 95.29, after a long excursus on medical ailments, Seneca joins the two elements of his metaphor:

Idem tibi de philosophia dico. Fuit aliquando simplicior inter minora peccantis et levi quoque cura remediabiles: adversus tantam morum eversionem omnia conanda sunt. Et utinam sic denique lues ista vincatur!

[I claim that the same is true for philosophy. Once upon a time it was simpler: people had fewer vices and they were also healed with less serious cures. We must try to do everything possible against such a grave subversion of character. If only this plague could finally be defeated!]

The vocabulary of ethical philosophy is interwoven with the vocabulary of medicine. Those in need of treatments are described as both sinners (peccantis) and curable (remediabiles). Seneca refers to moral degradation as both a grave subversion of character (tantam morum eversionem) and a plague (lues). Therefore the task of philosophy is to cure society of this moral downturn as medicine cures a plague. Individuals are infected by vice as by an illness. And the strength and complexity of the prescription / philosophy must match that of the illness / vice. But all the same the final optative wish (utinam vincatur) hints at the impossibility of ever fully acquiring ethical health.

Next Seneca further describes the current ethical plague: Non privatis sed publice furimus [Not only individually, but also societally, we are insane.](95.30). Here the medical and philosophical spheres merge. In diagnosing the plague upon his people as insanity, he refers to both disciplines at once: madness is both a philosophical and medical ailment. The convergence of the two disciplines in one

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17 Consider, for example, the case of Seneca’s own Hercules Furens, in which the insane Hercules is both medically (he sees visions, loses consciousness) and philosophically (he behaves unethically, commits homicide) sick.
figure allows the metaphor to be at its most potent. No longer does the metaphor function via the transference between two states, but rather it now simultaneously accesses both states: one who is “insane” is sick both in body and in soul. As Lakoff and Johnson have noted, it is at this point in the life of a metaphor—when it is taken for granted and nearly imperceptible—when it is most efficacious. At this point, moreover, metaphor structures the way in which one thinks about the concept. Thus the metaphor exists not only in the expression of the concept, but also in the very conception of it.

Indeed, the ailment of the soul manifests itself in the body. At 95.20–21 Seneca remarks that the ethics of women have grown so perverse that they have taken on the vices of men. They stay up late, drink, vomit, and drink some more. And, as if on cue, sexual perversity makes its appearance: *Libidine vero ne maribus quidem cedunt: pati natae (di illas deaeque male perdant!) adeo perversum commentae genus inpudicitiae viros ineunt* (95.21). [Not even in desire do they yield to men. Although they’re born to be penetrated—and may the gods not stand for this!—the women pervert the genus of imaginable licentiousness so greatly, and join the ranks of men.] Moreover, Seneca notes, even the doctors are confounded by the diseases that follow. Such are the consequences of ethical corruption: perverse erotics of Sadean proportions. We had best listen well to the sober doctrines of the Stoics, then.

Seneca also makes use of epistolary convention to weave medical discourse into his philosophical writing. He uses the standard salutation (*Seneca Lucilio suo salutem <dicit>*) and valediction (*vale*).¹⁸ Seneca explains the significance of the phrases at Ep. 15:

Mos antiquis fuit, usque ad meam servatus aetatem, primis epistulae verbis adicere ‘si vales bene est, ego valeo’. Recte nos dicimus ‘si

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¹⁸ For more on the salutation in the Latin letter: Lanham (1975), esp. 17–22.
philosopharis, bene est’. Valere enim hoc demum est. Sine hoc aeger est animus; corpus quoque, etiam si magnas habet vires, non aliter quam furiosi aut frenetici validum est. Ergo hanc praeципue valetudinem cura, deinde et illam secundam; quae non magno tibi constabit, si volueris bene valere. (15.1-2)

[Once upon a time—until my generation—it was the custom to start a letter with these words: “If you’re well, then all’s well. I’m well.” But, properly speaking, we would say: “If you’re philosophizing, then all’s well.” Because, you see, this is what it means to be well. Without philosophizing the soul is sick. And the body, moreover, even if it’s very strong, has but the strength of an insane or raving man. Therefore attend especially to the wellness of the soul, and secondly to that of the body. It won’t cost you much, if you want to be well.]

Thus Seneca redefines the traditional salutation to have a specific medical and philosophical meaning: physical health is redefined as the health of the soul. The medical vocabulary is transformed into ethical vocabulary: *banc valetudinem cura*. In this way references to physical health are to be understood as references to ethical health. Thus we find that the *salutatio* and valediction—which have lost their robustness over time—are reimbued with the resonances of medicine as a result. Thus when Seneca greets Lucilius we may understand also that he wishes good (physical, ethical) health upon him. Similarly, *vale* means, more strongly, “take good care of yourself,” rather than simply “bye.” In this way the philosophical content of every letter is delivered in medical scrubs. Moreover, this wordplay draws attention to the role which Seneca plays in the metaphor: the doctor. We may then recast the *Epistulae Morales* as a series of housecalls by Seneca, Doctor of Medicine and Doctor of Philosophy. He arrives at the door wishing us well (*Seneca Lucilio suo salutem*), assesses our progress, administers medicine, then tells us to take two pills and call him in the morning (*Vale*).

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While the role of the philosopher / doctor is not Senecan invention, he places special emphasis on the role. The opening of *De Tranquillitate Animi* stages a visit to Dr. Seneca’s office. Serenus addresses Seneca as a doctor (*medicus*: 1.2); he admits that he is not feeling entirely well (*nec aegroto nec valeo*: 1.2); he resolves to relate his symptoms to Seneca in hopes of receiving a diagnosis (*Dicam quae accident mihi; tu morbo nomen invenies*: 1.4). A long description of Serenus’ symptoms follow (1.5-15). In short, Serenus suffers from an inability to stick to his philosophical regimen, and hopes that Seneca can prescribe him a cure: *Rogo itaque, si quod habes remedium quo banc fluctuationem meam sistas,...* (1.18) [And so I ask of you, if you have any cure by which I can stop my vacillation,...] Seneca offers his assessment:

> Quaero mehercules iamdudum, Serene, ipse tacitus, cui talem affectum animi similem putem, nec ulli proprius admoveverim exemplo quam eorum qui, ex longa et gravi valetudine expliciti, motiunculis levibusque interim offensis perstringuntur et, cum reliquias effugerunt, suspicionibus tamen inquietantur medicisque iam sani manum porrigrunt et omnem calorem corporis sui calumniantur. (2.1)

[I have been wondering about this for some time now, Serenus, but I haven’t made a declaration yet; that is, to what should I compare such a state of the soul? I have not found an example any better than that of those who, although they have been extricated from a long and serious illness, from time to time come down with slight fevers and minor pains and, although they have survived the rest, nonetheless are troubled by anxiety and, although healthy, straightaway present their hands to the doctors and complain of any heat in their bodies.]

Thus Seneca concludes that Serenus’ ailment is psychosomatic. Like the patients who run to the doctor at the slightest sign of fever, Serenus runs to Dr. Seneca at the

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20 Barton, T. (2002) 133-168 investigates the relationship between the medical doctor and knowledge in Galen. Her work dovetails with this study in that both Galen and Seneca assume the role of doctor, and legitimize their positions through the organization and deployment of Knowledge/Power.

21 An interesting diagnosis which doubles up the body-mind metaphor: Serenus addresses Seneca using the metaphor (“my mind is troubled as if my body is ill”), and Seneca responds that Serenus’ mind is not in fact sick, he just *thinks* it is. And yet, Serenus’ mind must be ill if he judges his own health erroneously. But this doubling rather indicates that the initial metaphor doesn’t really function as a metaphor so much as a concept taken for granted, as Lakoff and Johnson would assert.
first sign of philosophical vacillation. And like those patients, Serenus need not worry about a relapse. And so Seneca sends Serenus away without a prescription. Or does he? What, then, is the remainder of the essay, if not a philosophical prescription? As with the Epistulae Morales, De Tranquillitate Animi opens with a medical session which in turn opens onto a philosophical session. In both texts, it is the seamlessness of the philosophy-medicine metaphor that facilitates the transition and, in De Tranquillitate Animi in particular, the Janus figure of Dr. Seneca, PhD.

The philosophy / medicine metaphor seems alive and well so far in Seneca. I have stated nothing which refutes Nussbaum’s claims. Dr. Seneca thus far has been nothing but professional, knowledgeable, and caring. But this is not the end of the good doctor’s visit.

We are not halfway through the Letters when the trouble begins. In Book Six Dr. Seneca falls ill. While Seneca has mentioned the illness—physical or philosophical—of others throughout the Letters and as recently as Letter 50, it is nonetheless striking when Seneca admits his own sickness at the opening of Book

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22 Note the irony in Serenus’ name: an indication that something is amiss. As we have seen with Felicio (Ep. 12) from the previous chapter, names in Seneca are not always entirely innocuous. See also Henderson (2004) 77-78 for Vatia’s name (Ep. 55). But more on Vatia below.

23 Janus figure: cf. the Socrates-Seneca doppel-bust. The bust has traditionally been interpreted as two icons of philosophical irony: Socrates the wise man in the guise of a fool, Seneca the fool in the guise of a wise man. Clearly I disagree with this straightforward belief in “Senecan irony”; I would, however, assert that Seneca encourages a belief in Senecan irony, i.e. Seneca-the-fool. Thus Seneca alone is a doppel-bust.

24 The book divisions are the subject of considerable scholarly discussion: it is unclear whether they are original to Seneca or introduced into the text by the MS tradition. I, for one, believe that the divisions are original. Some reasons why: As I will presently demonstrate, Book 6 takes as its theme sickness and dying; The surreal visit to Seneca’s villa in Ep. 12 (end of Book 1) is paralleled by the equally surreal visit to the Garden in Epicurus in Ep. 21 (end of Book 2); The “quotations of the day” traverse Books 1-3 and then abruptly end. For discussions on book division see Albertini (1923) 105-146; Cancik (1967) esp. 6-12, 138-151 Maurach (1970); Scarpat (1975); Wilson (2001) esp. 184-186; Henderson (2004) 28-29. Maurach and Scarpat assert particular divisions / cycles in the Letters. Cancik’s approach is similar, but more flexible. On Book 6: Henderson (2004) 34-35. Mazzoli (1991) 80-85 considers the significance of the opening anecdotes in the “Campania cycle”.

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Six, Letter 53. Seneca is on his way out of Rome, due south by boat to the Bay of Naples, when he is suddenly stricken with nausea. Despite the danger of the ship running aground, Seneca forces it towards the shore and, before it can drop anchor, clamors overboard and into the sea itself (53.1-4). Behavior certainly not befitting the good doctor: not only does he get seasick, he also betrays impatience in his haste to deboard. Nor can it be dismissed as an offhand anecdote: as the letter unfolds, its philosophical content turns out to be the very philosophy / medicine metaphor which a sick Seneca complicates. Our bodies, Seneca reflects, reminds us of its weaknesses when we have forgotten them: quanta nos vitiorum nostrorum sequetur oblivio, etiam corporalium (53.5). Indeed, Ep. 53 startles us with the vulnerability of the doctor. And once again the term vitium acts as the switchpoint, describing both bodily failing and ethical vice. Is Dr. Seneca simply physically seasick, or is he ethically ill as well? Both, it seems. After describing the nature of physical ailments, Seneca turns to ailments of the soul, using explicitly medical terminology to connect the two passages: bis morbis...animi (53.7):

Si aeger esses, curam intermisisses rei familiaris et forensia tibi negotia excidissent nec quemquam tanti putares cui advocatus in remissione descenderes; toto animo id ageres ut quam primum morbo liberareris. Quid ergo? non et nunc idem facies? omnia impedimenta dimitte et vaca bonae menti: nemo ad illam pervenit occupatus. Exercet philosophia regnum suum; dat tempus, non accipit; non est res subsiciva; ordinaria est, domina est, adest et iubet. (53.9)

[If you were sick, you would have stopped caring about personal affairs, you would have neglected public business, and you would not think so highly of anyone that you would undertake their case in a time of remission. And you would devote yourself fully to this task to free yourself from sickness as quickly as possible. So what then? Will you not do the same now? Discard excess baggage and make room for a healthy mind. No one attains it while preoccupied. Philosophy rules her own kingdom; she lends us time, not vice-versa; she’s not a hobby, but a regular duty. She’s our mistress, she is upon us, and she orders us.]

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We may observe here that, although Seneca was a sick patient at the beginning of the letter, by section nine he has changed back into doctor's scrubs. Seneca again takes his prescriptive, authoritative tone with Lucilius, directing him through imperatives (dimitte, vaca) to philosophize. The focus of the passage then shifts from Seneca-as-doctor to philosophy-as-medicine. It is philosophy, Seneca exhorts, which will free us from sickness (morbo liberareris). But now we have moved away from the medical metaphor and to yet another metaphor, that of slavery. Seneca has in fact forewarned us of this shift: curam intermisisses. While cura here means “anxiety” or “care”, by withholding the genitive modifier of cura until after the verb intermisisses, Seneca answers the conditional clause si aeger esses with the phrase curam intermisisses: “if you were sick, you would have given up on [the metaphor of] the cure.” The genitive rei familiaris corrects this misreading, but the misreading nonetheless signals the eventual “giving up” of the medical metaphor (morbo liberareris). We are subject instead to the domination of philosophy: domina est, adest et iubet. And philosophy is very much the master / mistress: she is everpresent (adest) and she commands us (iubet). And yet the commands in this passage are issued not by philosophy, but by Seneca (dimitte, vaca). Indeed, Seneca is everpresent (adest) and commanding (iubet). At every turn Seneca commands us to behave philosophically. In this way Seneca functions as a stand-in for philosophy. For the remainder of the letter Seneca commands us to take philosophy as our new mistress.

And when we think that Dr. Seneca has gotten a clean bill of health, we are reminded that this doctor of philosophy is not immune. Letter 54 begins:

Longum mihi commeatum dederat mala valetudo; repente me invasit. ‘Quo genere?’ inquis. Prorsus merito interroga: adeo nullum mihi ignotum est. Uni tamen morbo quasi adsignatus sum, quem quare Graeco nomine appellem nescio; satis enim apte dici suspirium potest. (54.1)

[For a long time my ill health had left me be; but it suddenly hit me again. You ask “Which illness?” And you're right to ask, since I know]
them all well. Nonetheless I have been assigned—so to speak—to one illness in particular. I don't know why I should call it its Greek name, since it suffices to call it some “difficulty in breathing”.

Seneca is sick again. We can now appreciate that the sickness of Letter 53 was no one-time affair, but the beginning of a repeated motif. We are meant to read this motif of the “sick Seneca” against the persona of Dr. Seneca. Even this passage alone pushes us towards seeing the two figures together. In the first sentence Seneca writes in the persona of “sick Seneca,” incessantly plagued by mala valetudo. This admission of illness is thrown into sharper relief by the two immediately preceding remarks: the epistolary conventions Vale and Seneca suo Lucilio salutem. The resulting effect is: “Be well”, “I hope you're well”, “I'm sick again.” However, in response to Lucilius’ imagined query, Seneca’s persona changes to that of the knowledgable doctor: Prorsus merito interrogas: adeo nullum mihi ignotum est. Dr. Seneca, disease taxonomist extraordinaire, is able to diagnose what ails sick Seneca. A respiratory ailment, he concludes; he needn’t mention its Greek name, though he knows that as well. The juxtaposition of the two Senecas prevents us from ignoring the presence of either of them. Thus we must face up to the paradox with which a sick Dr. Seneca presents us.

And we are not in the clear yet. Ep. 55: Seneca is back in the Bay of Naples area, and traveling.26 We remember what happened last time (Ep. 53). We are worried; Seneca is tired (fatiatus; labor est) and congested (bilis; spiritus densior). He is carried on a litter along an alluring beach up to Vatia’s villa (Ideo diutius vehi perseveravi invitante ipso litore, quod inter Cumas et Servili Vatiae villam curvatur…) This Seneca is the picture of dissolute aristocratic pleasures; he is ethically ill. He then tells us more about the villa’s one-time owner, Vatia:

In hac ille praetorius dives, nulla alia re quam otio notus, consenuit, et ob hoc unum felix habebatur. Nam quotiens aliquos amicitiae Asinii Galli, quotiens Seiani odium, deinde amor merserat (aeque enim offendisse illum quam amasse periculosum fuit), exclamabant homines, ‘o Vatia, solus scis vivere’. (55.3)

[Here that wealthy general, famed for naught but peaceful relaxation, lived out his days, and on the basis of this fact alone he is considered blessed. For so often nourishing a friendship with Asinius Gallus, or hatred for Sejanus, or love for him (for, you know, it’s just as dangerous to love him as offend him) had sunk men. So people would cry out, “Vatia, only you know how to live.”]

Vatia seems to have gotten it right, then: by avoiding the political scene at Rome he preserved his life. He is the very picture of the wise man (felix), avoiding both amor and odium to retire (consenuit) in peace (otio notus). He converts his odium to otium and personifies the Stoic dictum to be undisturbed by externalities. But there is something wrong with this picture. Vatia’s luxury and wealth doesn’t match the life of the wise man.

Seneca pulls us back: at ille latere sciebat, non vivere. Seneca is off the litter (non latet, vivit) and up on the soapbox: a life like Vatia’s is as good as death.27 It may look like a philosophical life, but it’s not: Sed adeo, mi Lucili, philosophia sacrum quiddam est et venerabile ut etiam si quid illi simile est mendacio placeat. (55.4) [But you see, Lucilius, philosophy is such a sanctified and august thing that even the mere appearance of it is pleasing as a charade.] We are made to feel like fools: how could we have gotten it so wrong, to believe that Vatia was anything but a quack? Because Seneca has led us into this harbor. The letter begins, we will remember, with Seneca suffering from mucus buildup and congestion, but the pleasant weather loosens the sand / mucus of the sea-beaten beaches / Seneca and dries them / him out. As Seneca recuperates, he begins his description of Vatia’s villa by directing his (and our) eyes to it: Ex consuetudine tamen mea circumspicere coepi an aliquid illic invenirem quod mihi posset bona

esse, et derexi oculos in villam quae aliquando Vatiae fuit (55.3). [As is my habit, I started looking around to find something that could be useful for me, and I looked towards Vatia’s villa.] Seneca looks for something useful (quod mihi posset bono esse), literally, something that would serve as a good for him, and that something is Vatia’s villa. We are not at fault for believing Vatia’s villa is a good thing. Seneca claims to have recovered from his sickness, and yet he has led us off the path of philosophy and landed us at the doorstep of a luxury-loving quack. We wonder, who is the quack now?

Indeed, Seneca later continues to praise the villa. The best thing about it, he says, is that it is next door to Baiae: Hoc tamen est commodissimum in villa, quod Baias trans parietem babet: incommodis illarum caret, voluptatibus fruitur. Has laudes eius ipse novi (55.7). [This is the best thing about the villa, that Baiae is just on the other side of the wall. It is spared Baiae’s disadvantages, but it enjoys the pleasures. I myself am acquainted with these attractions.] Truly, what is wrong with our Dr. Seneca? Wallowing in the pleasures of Baiae? Moreover, Seneca has just (Ep. 51) espoused the reasons why living near Baiae is in fact a very bad idea. Doctor, heal thyself.

Vatia’s villa is the last straw. We are sick (nauseabundus) and tired (fatigatus) of the charades of quacks. Let’s go back to Rome. But, Seneca protests, just one more stop: let’s stop by the baths. Groan. But we won’t go in, he explains. Fine.

Ep. 56 finds Seneca living upstairs (supra ipsum balneum habito; cf. trans parietem) from the baths. He then directs our ears to the practices downstairs: propone nunc tibi omnia genera vocum; cf. derexi oculos. Heinous as they are, he remains unperturbed, he says. A series of sounds are paraded before us in graphic detail: the grunting and

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28 See Motto & Clark (1970) for a similarly ironic reading of Ep. 56. However, they place the bath at Rome. Thomsen (1971-1980) 175 also places the baths in Campania, for the same reason as I do here: within the context of the surrounding letters it is clear that Seneca has not yet returned to Rome. A small point, but one which opens upon the interpretations of Book 6 as a whole. Although Thomsen takes great issue with Motto & Clark’s reading of the passage, it does not strike me that there is such a great gulf between them.
gasperg weightlifter, the slap of the oiled-up massage; the shouting scorekeeper of a
ball game; the scuffle of a thief; the serenade of the shower-singer; the cannonball of
someone jumping in... Seneca goes on for ten lines, but no, it's no problem, he
claims. Loudest of all, then:

Praeter istos quorum, si nihil aliud, rectae voces sunt, alipilum cogita
tenuem et stridulam vocam quo sit notabilior subinde exprimentem
nec umquam tacentem nisi dum vellit alas et alium pro se clamare
cogit;... (§6.2)

[Then in addition to those, which, if nothing else, are at least
legitimate sounds, imagine the hairplucker who cries out high and
shrill (all the better to hear it) and never stops shrieking, unless of
course he’s plucking someone else’s armpits and has them shrieking in
his place.]

Hair-pluckers: we’ve learned all about them in the previous chapter (Ep. 114.14).
Seneca admits there that plucking is fine, in moderation: no legs, please. But our man
here seems anything but moderate: nec umquam tacentem. Implicit in this description
is a sense of pleasure: the hair-plucker does so continuously to his delight. The only
time he’s silent is when he’s plucking someone else who in turn shrieks. The hair-
plucker thus reminds us of the sumministrator from the previous chapter, the paragon
of vices who engages in vice until he is full up with pleasure, then busies himself
supplying it to others and taking his pleasure in watching. But we also surmised in
Chapter 2 that Seneca himself was reflected in the figure of the sumministrator. Is
Seneca reflected again here in the alipilus? Does the good doctor spend his time
cultivating his own health except when he tends to ours? Or is it Seneca the reader
who is reflected here, taking pleasure in the pleasure of those at the baths, and in
turn presenting it (sumministrator) to us, the readers, for our enjoyment? In this way
Ep. 56 encapsulate the entirety of the Letters. The Letters, too, present a series of
alluring voices (often Seneca’s) which we are to resist in the name of philosophy.
This is all too much for us. We need to leave the baths. But Seneca explains that it is our own fault that we are perturbed. A calm mind, he explains, can overcome any physical obstacles, including these noises. He reminds us, too, of his position as doctor. There are illnesses of mind and illnesses of the body: illnesses of the body are easier to treat because they are evident (56.10). Illnesses of the mind, however, may lie latent [cf. Vatia: *At ille latere sciebat*] and untreated. After Ep. 55, we cannot but eye Seneca suspiciously. Is Seneca still sick, hiding his illness behind the façade of the doctor? He is, after all, the one who has brought us to Baiae and the baths. This is enough. Let us beat a hasty retreat back to Rome, leaving the other half of Book Six for the next chapter. Seneca concedes: *Fateor; itaque ego ex hoc loco migrabo* (56.15).

Seneca is very ill indeed: the book which begins with a case of nausea has transferred the sickness from the physical to the ethical sphere. That is, Seneca's sickness of the body becomes the sickness of his mind, and we are deposited at the doorstep of Vatia's Xanadu, next-door to Baiae, and upstairs from the baths. Before our collection ends with Ep. 124, in Ep. 123 Seneca leaves us with one last thought about doctors: *Nullam habet spem salutis aeger quem ad intemperantiam medicus bortatur* (123.17). [The sick whom the doctor rouses towards intemperance has no hope of health.] The warning comes too little, too late. We have already experienced that while trying to heal his patients, Seneca himself grows sicker. In this way the medical metaphor allows the vulnerability of the body to affect the health of the mind, and ultimately undermines our doctor.

We have seen, then, that Dr. Seneca is not immune—he is susceptible to both physical and ethical illnesses. At other times, however, Seneca is prone to err in the other direction. That is, in some cases Seneca decides that his patient is very ill and
in need of surgery. Often it is grief which ails these patients: Seneca the surgeon appears most prevalently in the *consolationes*.

In the *Consolatio ad Marciam* Dr. Seneca is charged with curing Marcia of grief over the death of her young son. At 1.8 Seneca gives Marcia a diagnosis:

> Cupissem itaque primis temporibus ad istam curationem accedere; leniore medicina fuisset oriens adhuc restringenda uis: uehementius contra inueterata pugnandum est. Nam uulnerum quoque sanitas facilis est, dum a sanguine recentia sunt: tunc et uruntur et in altum reuocantur et digitos scrutinium recipiunt, ubi corrupta in malum ulcus urterunt. Non possum nunc per obsequium nec molliter adgredi tam durum dolorem: frangendus est.

[Therefore I would have wanted to attempt treatment when you were first hurt: its incipient force could have yet been blunted with milder remedies. But since it’s taken root, I need to attack it more fiercely. Moreover, it’s easy to heal wounds so long as they’re fresh and bleeding, but once they’ve been infected and turn into a nasty sore, they need to be cauterized, exposed all the way through, and submitted to probing fingers. I cannot tackle such a deep-seated grief as yours mildly and indulgently. I need to shatter it.]

Marcia was wounded by the death of her son three years ago. While the wound might easily have been tended to at the time, she has allowed it to fester, and it has grown into her body. Seneca calls her grief a wound, in contrast to the philosophical sickness of others. Thus Marcia, like Serenus above, approaches Seneca with her wound. But her diagnosis is very different from Serenus’. The medical metaphor shifts to a martial one, and Seneca becomes a field medic. No ointments or salves will patch Marcia up. Indeed, the only way to make Marcia whole again is to tear her apart. The wound needs to be cauterized, cut open, and probed. In waging war against the wound, however, Seneca’s language feels very personal. Certainly, it is the wound which is burned, cut, and probed, but we do not forget that it is Marcia’s body. She is being burned, cut, and probed by Dr. Seneca’s fingers. We are right to sense that Dr. Seneca’s surgery involves the violation of Marcia’s body. He is not, moreover, apologetic; rather, he is insistent: *frangendus est*. Seneca forces Marcia into
the operating room and subjects her to violation. Dr. Seneca is a vicious surgeon indeed: *Marcia frangenda est.*

But Marcia’s surgery is not enough for Dr. Seneca, who sprinkles the entire ending of the *Consolatio ad Marciam* with vignettes of pleasure and desire. At 22.2, he describes Marcia’s deceased son’s physical beauty and the lecherous gazes of his fellow citizens. The vocabulary is suggestive: *pulcherrimum corpus, summa pudoris custodia, luxuriosae urbis oculos, inlaesum...formae decus.* Again at 22.3, the sadistic doctor—here plural!—makes a repeat appearance: he plunges his hands into the son (*totas in viscera manus demittentium*) and subjects the son’s gentalia to treatment (*non per simplicem dolorem pudenda curantium*). And once again at 24.3: the son, pursued by a pack of women, rejects their approach and blushes.

These vignettes are presented by Seneca as a list of threats to the son’s body which he avoided in death. Nonetheless, both the degree of suggestiveness and the erotic quality of the descriptions give us pause: why such a focus on the son’s chastity in the first and third passages, why the genitalia in the second? And why are all these passages clustered at the end of the essay? I would suggest that, while the content of the text narrates the son’s escape from these lecherous elements through death, the text itself subjects the son to these molestations through his death. That is, at the very moment in the essay when Seneca describes Marcia’s son’s ascent out of the physical world, this account is preceded and interrupted by these vignettes. In this way the death provides for the son not an escape from, but rather the subjection to

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29 This near-rape of Marcia is brought into greater profile in light of Seneca’s resolution at 1.5 to take Marcia’s gender into account. Of the recipients of *consolationes* Seneca does not violate Polybius, the only male. But there are also other issues afoot in the *Consolatio ad Polybium* which prevents such an easy interpretation. For Marcia, Helvia, and gender see Wilcox (2006). For a precis on the multivalent issues in the *Consolatio ad Polybium*, see Rudich (1997) 287 n.45.

30 Or is it: *Marcia frangendus est,*? Despite Seneca’s resolution at 1.5, he continues to treat her as a man throughout the entire *consolatio:* 6.3 (Marcia is a rector); 10.1 (Marcia has a formosa coniux); 16.1 (Seneca explicitly addresses the fact that all the exempla are men); 18.1 (Seneca addresses Marcia: *inventurus es*). *Frangendus est,* then, may take on a sexual valence: *fractus* = effeminate. Thus *Marcia frangendus est* = I need to effeminize Marcia.
these lecherous fantasies. Further, his death instantiates through the text the very molestations which he is said to avoid. The descriptions do not simply negate, but also reify the horror-fantasies: the thing must exist in order to be negated. Thus in the midst of his escape the son is subjected to the eyes of the leering city, the hands of the doctor upon his genitals, and the suggestive come-ons of the throng of admiring women. He has not, in fact, avoided violation.

Nor does Seneca allow us to forget the doctor. His appearance here reminds us of a cameo in De Constantia Sapientis 13.2:

Hunc affectum adversus omnis habet sapiens quem adversus aegros suos medicus, quorum nec obscena, si remedio egent, contractare nec reliquias et effusa intuerti designatur nec per furorem saeuentium excipere conuicia.

[The wise man has the same reaction to everybody that the doctor has to all his patients. If they need medical attention, he doesn’t scorn touching their genitalia, examining their excrement or discharge, or incurring the abuse of madmen in the midst of their ranting and raving.]

The dirty old man is also the wise old man. Though in De Constantia the wise man fondles reluctantly and within a discussion of medical practice, the doctor of Ad Marciam fondles in the context of lechery. Thus medical practice is eroticized, and the philosopher / doctor becomes suspect. Dr. Seneca leaves neither Marcia nor her son unscathed.

It is no different when Dr. Seneca drops in on his mum. In the consolatio to his mother Helvia we see Seneca take up the role of surgeon in consoling his mother for his own virtual death via exile. As above, Seneca stresses that the remedy must be applied at the appropriate time. He was holding off on the application of medicine, Seneca says, because a diseased body reacts badly to medication for which it is ill

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prepared: *nam in morbis quoque nihil est perniciosus quam inmatura medicina*;... (1.2) [for even in sickness nothing is more destructive than medicine applied at the wrong time.] Though at first it appears that Dr. Seneca has in mind a mild treatment, it quickly becomes clear that he means to conduct more invasive treatment: *tangi se ac tractari pateretur* (1.2). [that your grief would submit to being poked and prodded.]

We soon discover that this is a visit from the ruthless surgeon:

> Omnis itaque luctus illi suos, omnia lugubria admovebo: hoc erit non molli via mederi, sed urere ac secare. Quid consequar? ut pudeat animum tot miseriarum victorem aegre ferre unum vulnus in corpore tam cicatricoso. (2.2)  

[I will apply to your grief all of its own sorrow, all of its own mourning: this will be no gentle treatment, but cauterization and extraction. What will I gain from it? That your soul, which has overcome so many miseries, would be ashamed to take hard this one wound on such a scarred body.]

Seneca contrasts two medical methodologies: the easy way (*molli via*) and the hard way (*urere ac secare*). He diagnoses that Helvia’s grief cannot be molliated with the application of soothing topical ointments; rather, it requires a surgery which itself intensifies her pain. The verbs *urere* and *secare* graphically portray the treatment, and Seneca’s diagnosis for Helvia mirrors Marcia’s. As there, Seneca’s surgery on Helvia’s soul (*animus*) amounts to a violation of her body (*corpus*).

And so he steels Helvia for surgery:

> Gravissimum est ex omnibus quae umquam in corpus tuum descenderunt recens vulnus, fateor; non summam cutem rupit, pectus et visceram ipsa divisit. Sed quemadmodum tirones leviter saucii tamen vociferantur et manus medicorum magis quam ferrum horrent, at veterani quamvis confossi patienter ac sine gemitu velut aliena corpora exsaniari patiuntur, ita tu nunc debes fortiter praebere te curationi. (3.1)  

[I admit that this most recent wound is the most serious of all that have ever penetrated your body. It not only broke the skin, but it also cut your chest and even the internal organs. New recruits, though only slightly wounded, nonetheless cry out and are more frightened of the doctor’s hands than the sword. But the old hands, though stabbed severely, patiently and calmly endure the bloodletting as if it were]
Thus Seneca both describes the gravity of Helvia’s latest grief and reiterates her need to be healed of it. The wound that his exile has caused her is no flesh wound; rather it threatens her life, having sliced her vital organs. The conclusion she is to draw, then, is that she must acquiesce to being healed, if she is not to die. Like Marcia, Helvia is forced into the operating room. Moreover, she must effect a particular stance with respect to her body in being healed. That is, Seneca explicitly exhorts Helvia to behave like the old veterans of the army and disconnect herself from her physical body. This particular simile, then, exhorts Helvia to dissociate herself from the experience of physical pain by regarding her body as she would another’s. But there’s a wrinkle: this simile is already within the larger philosophy/medicine metaphor. This double-metaphor produces the following effect: Dr. Seneca first establishes the body as a metaphor for Helvia’s sick soul, then instructs Helvia to dissociate herself from this body. Again, if Helvia is to treat her soul as a body, and to treat this new body as if it were another’s, she must by deduction treat her soul as if it were another’s. But this is clearly not what Helvia is meant to do. That these metaphors make sense until pushed is a product of the deep and intricate interweaving of the philosophy/medicine metaphor.

Helvia’s wound upon her body is the equivalent of her grief upon her soul. Like Marcia, she mourns the loss of her son; Helvia’s son, however, is the exiled Seneca. Thus Seneca has violated Helvia twice: he wounds her with his exile, then with his surgery. And, worse yet, he will introduce new wounds: omnia proferam et rescindam, quae obducta sunt (2.1). [I will expose and tear open all the wounds that have healed over.] What sort of doctor is Seneca, anyways? Does he even know what he’s doing?
At 1.1, even before he engages the medical metaphor, Seneca admits that he himself is as much a patient as he is a doctor:

Itaque utcumque conabar manu super plagam meam inposita ad obliganda vulnera vestra reptare. (1.1)

[So even though I was attending to my own wound, I was somehow trying to feel my way towards bandaging your wounds.]

Indeed, Helvia’s doctor is sick. To make matters worse, he suffers from the same ailment as she. Although real-life doctors do fall ill, ailing metaphorical doctors are not the stuff of consolatio. Can Dr. Seneca heal her, if he has not successfully healed himself? Thus even before he has taken on the guise of Dr. Seneca, Seneca is already a patient. This admission of sickness undermines the medical metaphor and makes us question Dr. Seneca: can Seneca, and his philosophy, in fact cure us of our philosophical ailments?

Seneca’s use of the medical metaphor is thus similar to the treatment of reading and writing that we have seen in Chapter 2. Both Seneca’s author and doctor are presented as fallible authority-figures. Seneca-the-author feels pleasure at Lucilius’ prose; Dr. Seneca falls ill. As a result we see that the authority-figure Seneca presents is not a sapiens (indeed he never claims to be), but a fellow proficiens.

Seneca has turned the medical metaphor on its head. While he makes exemplary use of the age-old metaphor in the De Tranquillitate Animi, he

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32 Juvenal 2.12-13 offers itself up for a tantalizing re-reading in light of Seneca’s doubled (quadrupled?) figure of compromised / sadistic philosopher / doctor: sed podici levi / caeduntur tumidae medico ridente mariscae. [but the hemorrhoids were cut out from his fine ass by the smirking doctor]. While the “patient” in this scene is usually understood to be a hypocritical philosopher who has scarred his “fine ass” through overindulging in anal sex, we may now also see the philosopher in the persona of the smirking doctor. The philosopher is both patient and doctor, the sick and the healthy, the doubly penetrated and the sadistic penetrator. And if both patient and doctor are purported philosophers, whose philosophy should one follow? Neither shows himself to be the exemplary figure. This single snapshot perfectly encapsulates the horrifying ramifications of Seneca’s problematization of the medicine / philosophy metaphor.
problematizes the metaphor by complicating and comprimising the role of doctor. In Book Six of the *Epistulae Morales* his doctor is both medically and philosophically sick; in the *consolationes* to Helvia and Marcia his doctor is overeager, even cruel and sadistic. Thus, while the medical metaphor seems initially to explain and clarify the work of philosophy and of a philosopher, it in fact does philosophical work of its own. Equating the health of the soul with the health of the body demonstrates the vulnerability of the body, and its ability to undermine the work of ethics. Ailments of the body become ailments of the soul, manifesting as erotics in the text, in defiance of the Stoic extirpation of the passions.

How, then, might we read this metaphor? And how does it relate to Seneca’s definition of metaphor in Ep. 108 (from *praecepa to rem*)? In fact, this transfer is precisely what the medical metaphor enacts: the transfer of the precepts of philosophy into the reified thing of the body. Thus *translatio*, the ethical work of philosophy, is found in the transfer between soul and body. But is it not troubling, then, that the medical metaphor ultimately “fails”, revealing the vulnerability of the body? That the body is fragile does not imply that the work of ethics will ultimately fail. Rather, what sick Dr. Seneca reveals to us is that the presence of the body complicates, but does not relieve us of the task of transferring precepts to actions, of walking the talk.

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33 Thus the need to regulate the body in “Technologies of the Self”, as Foucault terms these techniques.
CHAPTER 4

THE EROTICS OF DEATH

Seneca’s treatment of death, and suicide in particular, has been widely acknowledged as somewhat unusual.\(^1\) While many studies recognize the prevalence of the theme of death, the pleasure obtained through death remains an avoided subject.\(^2\) John Rist inadvertently comes closest in his oft-cited assertion that “fundamentally Seneca’s wise man is in love with death.”\(^3\) While Rist means to emphasize that the *sapiens* despises life and always seeks a viable reason to leave it, the hyperbolic phrase “in love with” speaks of an erotic relationship with death. This chapter will demonstrate, then, that Seneca’s treatment of death establishes a desire for it within the *proficiens* (rather than the *sapiens*). Moreover, the erotic relationship with death is paradoxically predicated on the absence of erotics in death. That is, the Stoic *proficiens* learns to desire death because it is devoid of erotics.

In Chapters 2 and 3 we observed that both words and bodies present opportunities for erotics to enter into the Stoic’s experience of ethical behavior. The ambiguity of words prevents the hegemony of philosophical *logos* in discourse, and


\(^{2}\) The notion of “pleasure in death” is clearly contrary to Stoic doctrine. Doctrine would hold that there is no place for pleasure anywhere in the ethical life—or death. It is for this reason, I believe, that this theme is under-examined.

\(^{3}\) Rist (1969) 249.
rather also admits rhetorical and erotic registers in the *Letters*. In the transfer of philosophical discourse into the realm of ethical action, the medical metaphor reveals the body as the weak link in this transfer: its susceptibility to overshoot the goal (sadistic Dr.) or fall short of it (sick Dr.) demonstrates the difficulty of actually properly enacting the transfer from theory to practice. Since death, then, removes the difficulties of the word or the body, it is depicted in Seneca as an object of desire.

Rist's assertion above alludes to and seeks to refute what Seneca himself states in Ep. 24:

Vir fortis ac sapiens non fugere debet e vita sed exire; et ante omnia ille quoque vitetur adfectus qui multos occupavit, libido moriendi. (24.25)

[The steadfast and wise man ought not flee from life, but depart it. And above all else he ought also avoid the passion which has overcome many, the desire of dying.]

Rist contends that the opinions and attitudes which Seneca expresses elsewhere in the *Letters* refutes the above quotation; in short, that this bit of doctrine cannot overcome Seneca's overall attitude of advocating death, and suicide in particular. Again, the old Seneca-the-hypocrite line. Rather, I believe that Rist fails to make a small but important distinction in Seneca's doctrine on death. Rist states that "fundamentally Seneca's wise man is in love with death." But the wise man, as Seneca states, is not in love with death (*libido moriendi*); the fool / *proficiens*, however, is. What does this distinction amount to? The *sapiens*, who lives a perfected Stoic life, approaches death as an indifferent; for the rest of us death presents the prospect of release from the difficulties of the word and the body. Seneca most clearly describes his stance on the *sapiens* and suicide:

Itaque sapiens vivet quantum debet, non quantum potest. Videbit ubi victurus sit, cum quibus, quomodo, quid acturus. Cogitat semper qualis vita, non quanta sit. [sit] Si multa occurrunt molesta et tranquillitatem turbantia, emittit se; nec hoc tantum in necessitate ultimate facit, sed
cum primum illi coepit suspecta esse fortuna, diligenter circumspicit numquid illic desinendum sit. Nihil existimat sua referre, faciat finem an accipiat, tardius fiat an citius: non tamquam de magno detrimento timet; nemo multum ex stilicidio potest perdere. Citius mori aut tardius ad rem non pertinet, bene mori aut male ad rem pertinet; bene autem mori est effugere male vivendi periculum. (70.4-6)

[Therefore the wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can. He will see where he will live, with whom, how, what he will do. He always considers the quality, not the quantity, of his life. If many troubles and turmoils oppose his tranquility, he releases himself. Nor does he do so as a last resort, but, as soon as he begins to mistrust fortune, he carefully examines whether he should then let go of life. He calculates that it is of no importance whether he imposes an end or accepts it, whether it happens earlier or later. Nor does he fear it as if it were a great loss: no one can lose much from a drop. Whether he dies earlier or later has no bearing on the matter. Whether he dies well or badly does have bearing on the matter. However, to die well is to escape the danger of living badly.]

Throughout the passage Seneca places emphasis on the rational consideration of quality over quantity. Nowhere in the passage is there indication of the sapiens wanting to die; indeed, the sapiens is characterized by the use of indicative verbs (whan grammatically possible) without the mediation of modal verbs. But there is certainly something alluring and attractive about the sapiens' resolve. He does not—as we do—vacillate; rather he considers, examines, calculates. We are made to envy him his clarity. The final sentence of Seneca's depiction of the wise man and death leaves us with one last incentive to desire death: bene autem mori est effugere male vivendi periculum. That is, in stripping us of our words and our bodies, death strips us of opportunities to fail at our ethics. But this last statement does not refer to the sapiens' motivation to leave life, for the phrases effugere and male vivendi cannot describe the actions of the sapiens: by definition the wise man does not flee, nor do anything badly. Moreover, the conjunction autem indicates that this sentence in some way contrasts the one that precedes it. Seneca, then, seems to be shifting from discussing the behavior of the wise man to discussing the advantages of dying well. The sentiment expressed in this sentence appeals not to the wise man but to us.
Thus while Seneca advocates the poise of the *sapiens*, he also inculcates a desire for death in the *proficiens*.

The Stoic doctrine on death is that it is an indifferent (*adiaphoron*). Like health and wealth, death is considered an object which ought not have an effect on our selves. Thus while we may prefer or disprefer death, it should not constitute happiness or unhappiness for us. The majority, however, seek to avoid death out of fear of it. Seneca corrects this mistaken opinion, but in so doing also depicts death as a desirable state.

Moreover, the *Letters* depict men desiring and acting out their deaths. At Ep. 30.5 Seneca praises Aufidius Bassus’ preparedness for death: *Bassus noster videbatur mihi prosequi se et componere et vivere tamquam superstes sibi et sapienter ferre desiderium sui*. [Our man Bassus seemed to me to lay himself out and to bury himself, and then to live as if he outlived himself, and to bear his own absence as a wise man does.] Bassus takes up a position external to himself, relating to himself as if he were another person. Moreover, his relationship with the dead Bassus is that of a wise man: *sapienter ferre desiderium sui*. Thus Bassus prepares for his imminent death by rehearsing it. This practice—*meditatio*—is a feature of Stoicism. But Seneca is quick to tell us that not all who practice it do so correctly. At Ep. 12.8–9 Seneca tells of a Pacuvius, who extravagantly stages his own funeral. Pacuvius’ nightly funerals are deemed inappropriate because they are but vehicles for Pacuvius to indulge in the excesses of food and drink. And there are eunuchs, and Greek singing. Thus Seneca concludes that we may follow Pacuvius’ lead, but we ought to do it with ethical intent.

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4 L&S 58 on indifferents (*adiaphoron*). Cancik (1967) 121–126 on indifferents in the *Letters*.


Throughout the *Letters*, then, Seneca depicts instances of death as opportunities for us to meditate upon death. However, while these depictions of death are a far cry from Pacuvius’ banquets, they nonetheless are depicted as moments of pleasure which appeal to us.

In Ep. 77 Seneca relates the death of Tullius Marcellinus, who commits suicide rather than clinging to an increasingly unsatisfactory life. However, the moment of Marcellinus’ death presents an unexpected moment of pleasure:

> Solium deinde inlatum est, in quo diu iacuit et calda subinde suffusa paulatim defecit, ut aiebat, non sine quadam voluptate, quam adferre solet lenis dissolutio non inexperta nobis, quos aliquando liquit animus. (77.9)

> [Then a bathtub was brought in. He lay in it for a long time, and—as warm water was frequently poured over him—little by little he departed, ‘not without some pleasure’, as he described it. A gentle dissolution usually carries with it this pleasure, nor are we unfamiliar with it, if we have ever fainted.]

Marcellinus determines to die: his actions leading up to this scene are well-considered, rational, Stoic. As he dies, however, he describes it as occurring “not without a certain pleasure.” At the end of all that Stoic doctrine is a death of pleasure. Moreover, not only is it surprising that the moment of death is described as pleasurable, the term used for pleasure is *voluptas*. *Voluptas* is, of course, rejected by Stoicism as a passion. *Voluptas* is to be extirpated in favor of the more Stoic and less dangerous eupathy, *gaudium*. And yet the sensation which Marcellinus feels is different from Pacuvius’ pleasure in food and drink. Indeed, *voluptas* seems to be used positively here. In Marcellinus’ death, then, death is associated with *voluptas*, despite the insistence of Stoic doctrine to the contrary.

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8 As we have seen in Ep. 59.
The *consolatio* to Marcia on the death of her son, however, also narrates a pleasurable journey of death. Though Seneca speaks of death throughout, three passages in particular specifically address the experience of death: 19.5, 23.1, and 24.5ff. The last is an extended narrative of Marcia’s son’s journey to the afterlife.

First, at 19.5 Seneca describes the experience of dying in terminology similar to Ep. 77:

Mors dolorum omnium exsolutio est et finis ultra quem mala nostra non exeunt, quae nos in illam tranquillitatem in qua antequam nascemur iacuimus reponit. Si mortuorum aliquis miseretur, et non natorum misereatur. Mors nec bonum nec malum est; quod vero ipsum nihil est et omnia in nihilum redigit, nulli nos fortunae tradit. Mala enim bonaque circa aliquam versantur materiam: non potest id fortuna tenere quod nulla dimisit, nec potest miser esse qui nullus est. (19.5)

[Death is the dissolution of all pain, and the end which our hardships cannot pass. And it returns us to that serenity in which we lay before our birth. If anyone pities the dead, then he should also pity those not yet born. Death is neither a good nor a bad; it really is nothingness itself and it leads everything to nothingness, it makes us subject to no chance. This is because good and bad depends upon some matter. Chance cannot constrain that which nature has released, nor can he who is no one be wretched.]

In the first sentence of this passage we find the same vocabulary of death as in Marcellinus’ death: Seneca here defines death as an *exsolutio*, similar to *dissolutio* in Ep. 77. But in contrast to Marcellinus’ death, there is no mention of *voluptas*.

This passage reflects the doctrines of Stoicism. Indeed, Seneca asserts that death is neither a good nor a bad. To be a good or a bad, something must first be a something. That is, since death is in essence nothing (*vero ipsum nihil est*) its quality cannot be evaluated. Seneca reiterates the nothingness of death when he states that death lies beyond the jurisdiction of chance. Like the good and the bad, chance (*fortuna*) is relevant only for the material; chance can render as good and bad only things with the matter to be affected by it: *mala enim bonaque circa aliquam versantur materiam.*
In this description of death, then, we find a conceptualization of death similar to the one in Marcellinus’ death: a dissolution to nothingness. Here, however, there is no experience of pleasure. What pleasure there is lies in the promise of death to release us from the problems of the physical world, and life. Death promises us a release from pain, an end to hardship, and serenity. We cannot be wretched in death. With the dissolution of the physical world, the soul achieves a release from the difficulties which arise from its consort with the physical body.

Next, at 23.1-2 Seneca describes the experience of a soul leaving the body, which is now described as decidedly pleasurable. At 23.2 the soul expresses pleasure in, and desire for, its separation from the body: *exire atque erumpere gestiunt* [they yearn to go out, that is, to break out]; *in mortem prominere, hoc velle, hoc meditari, hac semper cupidine ferri in exteriora tendentem* [it reaches for death, it wants this, it plans this, it is always obsessed with this desire to be taken outside of the body]. So the soul’s departure from the body is described as a pleasurable experience, and the soul aims at this experience as an object of desire. The vocabulary gives away the soul’s desire. The verb *gestio* from the first passage is reminiscent of Cicero’s term for the passion of pleasure, *voluptas gestiens*. Meanwhile the second passage expresses want (*velle*) and a Stoic term for the passion of desire, *cupido*. These evocations of erotic activity in the soul run counter to the Stoic ethical doctrine: this soul, as Rist asserts, is “in love with death.”

Additionally, this passage alludes to Plato’s *Phaedrus: inde est quod Platon clamat.* In his second speech in the *Phaedrus* Socrates tells of how souls depart from bodies and make their ascent toward the realm of the Forms (247c–248c). The gods may view them always, but the souls of mortals must struggle for even a glimpse. The

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souls of mortals are aided in this endeavor by its wings, which bear them towards the heavens. And, Socrates tells us, the pleasure of, and desire for, a beautiful boy encourages the sprouting and spreading of these wings (249d, 251a-c). In this way pleasure and desire (eros) lead the soul to the heavens. Though formulated differently from Plato, thus Seneca too draws a connection between death and pleasure.

The description proper of Marcia’s son’s journey in the afterlife begins at 24.5 and continues to the end of the essay. In it the soul is characterized as breaking free from the body and this world as if from bondage. The body is described as the chains which bind the soul to the physical world. But upon death, the body gains entrée to the realm of the souls. It is a utopia. It provides aeterna requies, and pura et liquida sights for the soul. The soul is integer, having lost in its body nothing but that which inconvenienced and hampered it. The soul now socializes with other like souls in the rarified aether: ad excelsa sublatus inter felices currit animas (25.1). Marcia’s son’s soul meets the Scipios and the Catos and, most importantly, Cordus, Marcia’s father. Seneca then has Cordus turn and address Marcia himself.

As it turns out, Cordus, too, has experienced his own personalized version of utopia in the afterlife. At 26.5 he speaks of his goals in life, to compose a limited history: Iuvabat unius me saeculi facta componere in parte ultima mundi et inter paucissimos gesta [I was trying to organize the events of one age in the farthest region of the world, and the accomplishments of just a few peoples]. In the heavens, he continues, he is able to see the ultimate realization of these goals: tot saecula, tot aetatum contextum, seriem, quidquid annorum est, licet visere: licet surrectura, licet ruitura regna prospicere et magnarum urbium lapsus et maris novos cursus [I can observe so many ages, such continuity of the ages, the organization of the years—whatever there is of one. I can observe empires that will rise, ones that will fall, the decline of great cities, the different tides of the sea]. Thus Cordus is able to realize in death his desires from life. He then explains the cycles of the heavens, and the ultimate ekpyrosis. The
consolatio ends with Seneca exclaiming at the happiness of Marcia’s son, whose happiness, like Cordus’, lies in knowledge: Felicem filium tuum, Marcia, qui ista iam novit! (26.7) Marcia’s son is blessed, Seneca reflects, because he is now in a position to know the workings of the cosmos. In death, then, one may finally acquire happiness: felicem filium tuum.

Death, then, is depicted as a release from the physical realm and its pleasures, but death also offers pleasures of its own, and becomes an object of desire for the soul. Thus the rejection of pleasure and desire in Stoic ethics is paradoxically balanced by a depiction of the afterlife which is pleasurable and desirable.

Moreover, the pleasurable experience of death is not restricted to the dying individual. Rather the pleasure is extended also to one who reads or contemplates death. Before he describes her son’s journey to the heavens, Seneca instructs Marcia:

Harum contemplatione uirtutum filium gere quasi sinu! Nunc ille tibi magis uacat, nunc nihil habet, quo auocetur; numquam tibi sollicitudini, numquam maerori erit. Quod unum ex tam bono filio poteras dolere, doluisti; cetera, exempta casibus, plena uoluptatis sunt, si modo uti filio scis, si modo quid in illo pretiosissimum fuerit intellegis. (24.4)

[In contemplation of these virtues, hold onto your son as you would in your embrace! Now he has more leisure to share with you, now he has nothing to call him away from you. He will never cause you to worry, never to grieve. The one thing that you could grieve over in such a good son, you have. The rest, free from vicissitudes, is full of pleasure, provided you know how to enjoy your son, provided you recognize what was most dear in him.]

The contemplation of the afterlife alone, then, is sufficient for pleasure (plena voluptatis). The son’s journey at the end of the consolatio thus has consoling power by virtue of the pleasure of its narrative. As Marcia’s son ascends to the aether and meets Cordus, Marcia too is along for the ride. Marcia’s presence is acknowledged and emphasized by Cordus’ address to her: his speech draws her into their utopian space and allows her to experience their pleasure by reading it. This scenario is
reminiscent of the sumministrator / voyeur of Chapter 2. By watching or reading of her son's pleasure in death, Marcia too may experience the same pleasure.  

However, there is a slight distinction between the sumministrator and Marcia: the pleasure which Marcia is instructed to share in is to be distinguished from the voyeur's dissolute pleasures. The voyeur's pleasures are cast as excessive, but Marcia's are not.

But we should also note that both the voyeur's and Marcia's pleasures are termed voluptas. So there is some consistency between the two pleasures despite their apparent differences.

In the Letters, too, Seneca relates that contemplation of the cosmos brings pleasure:

Quomodo molestus est iucundum somnium videnti qui excitat (aufert enim voluptatem etiam si falsam, effectum tamen verae habentem) sic epistula tua mihi fecit iniuriam; revocavit enim me cogitationi aptae traditum et iturum, si licuisset, ulterius. Iuvabat de aeternitate animarum quaerere, immo mehercules credere;... (102.1-2)

[Just as it is irritating for someone dreaming happily to be roused (for even if he ruins a false pleasure, it nonetheless has the feel of a true one), your letter did me similar disservice. For it called me back from being lost in good thought, and I would have continued still further if I could have. It's a pleasure to think about the immortality of soul, but even more so to believe in it;...]

Thus begins Ep. 102. Seneca chastizes Lucilius for interrupting his philosophical daydreaming of imagining the heavens. Seneca uses the same terminology as in Ad Marciam: the pleasure of contemplation is termed voluptas. The visualization of the

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10 Cf. the Syracuse ekphrasis at Ad Marc. 17.2 ff. Seneca describes a sea voyage to Syracuse, detailing the beautiful sights one would see there. At the end of the ekphrasis, however, Seneca brings the reader face to face with the tyrant Dionysius, who threatens to enslave, execute, or sexually exploit his subjects. Once again the act of reading compromises the reader and lands him in the midst of erotic pleasure: arcesset ad libidinem mares feminasque et inter foedos regiae intemperantiae greges parum erit simul binitis coire (17.5). [He drags in both men and women for his sexual desire and among the foul crowds of the monarch's intemperance it will not be enough to take two at once.] The ekphrasis of the afterlife stands in contrast to this ekphrasis: the ekphrasis of the afterlife does not expose the reader to sexual dissoluteness, but to the dissolution of the cosmos in ekpyrosis. Thus the pleasure and desire of the afterlife is slightly different from Dionysius' pleasure and desire.

11 On the structure of this letter see also Leeman (1951).
afterlife, then, is a source of pleasure. Moreover, as so often happens in the *Letters*, this anecdotal beginning is connected to the philosophical subject matter of Ep. 102. The letter considers the limitations of mortality, and at the end of the letter Seneca returns to contemplating the cosmos. From §21 to the end of the letter (§30) Seneca describes the soul’s journey through the afterlife in nearly identical terms as at the end of *Ad Marciam*, highly reminiscent of both Plato’s description of the heavens in the *Phaedo* and the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*. As with the description of the cosmos at the end of the *consolatio*, the description at the close of Ep. 102 enacts for the reader the pleasure of contemplating the cosmos. Just as Marcia is meant to take pleasure and solace in reading the ekphrastic ending of the *consolatio*, Lucilius is meant to experience the pleasure of contemplation through the end of the letter. Needless to say we, too, as reader are meant to share Lucilius’ experience.

Such descriptions of the afterlife occur with some frequency in the *Letters*. Pierre Hadot has documented the variations on the theme within different philosophical schools, and the importance of the “view from above” as a philosophical exercise. While it is implicit in the works he examines, Hadot does not connect the “view from above” with the experience of pleasure. Indeed, Hadot would likely disagree with the notion. But all the same there is Seneca in Ep. 102 and the *consolatio* to Marcia espousing the pleasure (*voluptas*) of philosophical daydreaming. This contemplation of the afterlife, then, arouses pleasure for: 1) the

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12 Ep. 65, 75, 79, 84, 92.


14 On the basis of Hadot’s remarks on *voluptas* and *gaudium* in ibid. 207. There he replies to Foucault’s reading of Ep. 23 and Foucault’s translation of *gaudium* as a “form of pleasure”, noting that Foucault’s translation fails to distinguish *voluptas* from *gaudium*. And yet we have discovered in Chapter 2 that this ‘mistranslation’ does not begin with Foucault, but rather with Seneca himself. Thus while Hadot impugns Foucault for his inability to distinguish *voluptas* from *gaudium*, perhaps he really ought to take the matter up with Seneca. It is, of course, my contention that Seneca’s ‘mistakes’ are quite intentional.
one who experiences it; 2) the one who contemplates / visualizes it; 3) the one who reads it.

The distinctions between these three vantage points are blurred when Seneca equates life with the letter. Seneca says it most explicitly at Ep. 77.20:

_Quomodo fabula, sic vita: non quam diu, sed quam bene acta sit, refert._
_Nihil ad rem pertinet quo loco desinas. Quocumque voles desine: tantum bonam clausulam inpone. Vale._

[As a tale, thus life. It’s not how long, but how well it is executed that matters. It’s not at all relevant where you end. End wherever you wish; just have a good conclusion. Farewell.]

The analogy here of life to a tale reminds us of the analogy of prose style (oratio) to life (vita) explored in Chapter 2. However, the focus this time is on the end of the tale / life: it matters not when one ends, but how. As Seneca expresses it, “let the last clausula be good.” And with that he ends the letter. The letter, too, is a sort of tale, then, and the end of a letter signals the end of life. At the end of Ep. 92 the two events coincide. After a direct address by the soul on the painlessness of death, Seneca tells us about the death of Maecenas:

_Diserte Maecenas ait,_
_nec tumulum curo: sepelit natura relictos._
_Alte cinctum putes dixisse; habuit enim ingenium et grande et virile,_
_nisi illud secunda discinxissent. Vale._ (92.35)

[Maecenas spoke knowledgably:
_I do not care for a tomb: nature buries what remains._
_You will imagine that an upright man said this. For he possessed ample and robust talent, had good fortune not dissolved it. Farewell._]

Maecenas’ death coincides with the end of Ep. 92, and his quotation serves to underscore the point made in the soul’s speech: that the body, left behind and destroyed by the work of nature, means nothing to the soul. The lack of a tomb matters to Maecenas’ soul not at all. Indeed, Maecenas’ statement that he wants no tomb is, paradoxically, his tomb. The quotation serves as his epitaph: _Here lies Maecenas: I desired no tomb; let nature take care of my body._ But surely Seneca cannot let
Maecenas get away so easily; Maecenas was, after all, the man who walked mincingly accompanied by a troop of eunuchs in Ep. 114. Seneca edits the epitaph with an addendum: *Here lies Maecenas: manly talent, too bad fortune sissified him. Fare thee well.* Just as *Vale* in the previous chapter meant “be healthy” in the medical context, in this funereal context it means, “R.I.P.” Thus the letter ends with an obituary: the end of Maecenas’ life is the end of the tale of this letter. And what a final clausula Seneca has left Maecenas with: *habuit enim ingenium et grande et virile, nisi illud secunda discinxissent.*

Maecenas, however, is not the only one who dies at the end of a letter. More often than not it is Seneca who dies. This becomes a theme in the latter half of Book 6. Last chapter we left Seneca in the midst of Book 6, Ep. 56, upstairs from the baths. He relents and agrees to return to Rome; we will recall that he had come down with a nasty ethical ailment. But on the trip back we will observe that Seneca’s condition becomes fatal.

Ep. 57 finds Seneca returning from Baiae (*Cum a Bais...*) but this time Seneca opts for the road-trip. A good sign, it seems, since Seneca is prone to seasickness (Ep. 53). Not so: the road is so waterlogged that it might as well be the sea (*ut possim videri nibilominus navigasse*). He is as filthy as a wrestler fresh from his match, Seneca complains: sand caked onto grease (*a ceromate nos haphe excepit in crypta Neapolitana*). Worse, though is that prison: *nibil illo carcere longius.* This prison is pitch black, and dusty. Though Seneca never actually tells us, we realize soon enough that it is only a tunnel. But by now we should be wary of taking the Senecan anecdote at face value. Typically the anecdote reflects the philosophical content of the letter. The tale of the tunnel, then, is related to the later meditation on the immortality of the soul: the

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15 Cancik (1967) 90 notes that the frequency and consistency of these opening anecdotes are unique to Book Six. Mazzoli (1991) creates a taxonomy of these opening anecdotes by their relationships to the philosophical topics of the *Letters.*
tunnel is akin to death. Indeed, Seneca reflects in §3 that, were he beyond the vicissitudes of fortune [read: sapiens], he would have found the whole experience exhilarating: sensi quendam ictum animi et sine metu mutationem quam insolitae rei novitas simul ac foeditas fecerat. [I felt a certain movement of the soul and a terrorless change, which the newness and the discomfort of an unfamiliar situation roused.] The dark and dusty tunnel is thus recast as an opportunity to emulate the behavior of the sapiens. In this way Seneca encourages a desire for death as an opportunity for perfect ethical behavior.

Indeed, Seneca’s description of exiting the tunnel sounds remarkably like the experience of death in the Consolatio Ad Marciam or Ep. 102: rursus ad primum conspectum redditae lucis alacritas rediit incogitata et iniussa (57.6). [At the first glimpse of the approaching light, my liveliness returned without my thinking of it or ordering it.] Ep. 57, then, presents two images of the experience of death: the dark and dusty tunnel which frightens all but the sapiens; the departure from the tunnel into the light. The first image becomes debunked as an unreasonable justification for fear (§4–7); the tunnel is the popular misconception of the experience of death, while exiting the tunnel is the more accurate analogy for death. The end of the letter, then, discusses the soul’s separation from the body upon death. The soul, Seneca says, cannot be restrained within the body by any physical obstacles (§8–9). The particles of the soul are minute enough that they may escape in between the particles of the body. The tunnel analogy works: like Seneca emerging from the dust of the tunnel, the soul makes its way through the membranes of the body to the aether. We may recall now that the tunnel was first characterized as a prison (carcer). The body, too,

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16 Motto & Clark (1973) read the tunnel as a descent to the Underworld, a necessary initiation to become a sapiens.
is described as a prison for the soul. The tunnel, then, is not an analogy for death, but rather for life, and the escape from the tunnel is the escape from the bondage of life. In its entirety Ep. 57 charts a shift in perspective from irritation at the difficulties of life to acceptance of, and perhaps eagerness for, the experience of death.

Ep. 58 finds Seneca playing with Plato. But before we even arrive at Seneca’s description of Platonic metaphysics, he prefaces it with a discussion of translation from Greek to Latin. Invoking the familiar trope, Seneca bemoans that many Greek words have no Latin equivalents, or that some Latin words have fallen out of use. His first example is the Greek oestron, Latin asilum: Hunc quem Graeci ‘oestron’ vocant, pecora peragentem et totis saltibus dissipantem, ‘asilum’ nostrī vocabant (§2). [This animal which the Greeks call an “oestron”, which harasses the cattle and scatters them throughout all the pastures, we used to call an “asilum”.] This oestron / asilum is, of course, the gadfly. And the gadfly immediately evokes the legacy of Socrates. The loss of the gadfly, then, is multiply meaningful: it signifies the death of Socrates, the metaphorical death of ethics, and the difficulty of translating philosophy from Greek to Latin.

But Seneca plunges in regardless. Sections 7-25 describe Platonic metaphysics: Seneca enumerates the different classes of things which exist. At the end of all this, he imagines that Lucilius asks what the point of all this is. Seneca replies that Platonic metaphysics is particularly useful because it recognizes that the physical and material objects in this world are unimportant. Seneca then turns to a discussion of

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17 Epp. 24.17, 26.10, 65.16, 65.21, 70.12, 70.19, 76.25, 102.30.


19 On this passage see also Henderson (2004) 147-149. Henderson’s reading is similar, but sans Socrates.

20 The story of Ep. 58 is to be continued in the next chapter...
death and the afterlife of the soul. At the end of the letter, Seneca espouses suicide under certain circumstances. If it’s reasonable, he says, he would commit suicide:

*prosiliam ex aedificio putri ac ruenti* (§35). [I would dash out this crumbling and tumbling house.] He imagines his death in this manner for two entire sections (§35-36). Then he ends the letter:


[But I’m going on for too long. Moreover, there’s enough material to fill up the day. And how will one be able to put an end to his life, if he cannot put an end to his letter? So, farewell. You are more disposed to read this one word than to read about undiluted death. Farewell.]

This time it is not Maecenas who dies at the end of the letter, but Seneca himself. Seneca draws a parallel between the end of the letter and the end of his life. Then he promptly ends the letter with the typical closing, *Vale*. In this context, however, *Vale* takes on yet another meaning. While in Ep. 102 it meant “R.I.P., Maecenas,” here it means “Farewell, for the last time.” But it is not for the last time. Right after he says *Vale ergo*, Seneca continues writing: *Quod libentius quam mortes meras lecturus es.* But then he actually ends the letter: *Vale*. So Seneca appears to die, pick himself back up from the grave, only to die again. This image would be entirely ridiculous were it not patterned on an earlier, more famous and more Stoic suicide: Cato’s. Seneca, in fact, has reminded us of it already at Ep. 24.7: Cato stabs himself, is discovered and bandaged up, then rips off the bandages. Cato’s doubled death, then, serves as the paradigm for Seneca’s doubled death here.

Letter 58, then, begins by evoking the death of one *sapiens*, Socrates, and ends with another, Cato. And in between we are taught that the material and physical

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experience of the world is fleeting and, in short, nothing. Thus we see Seneca trying to die, and we the readers are also inculcated with an implicit affinity for death.

We have now arrived at Letter 59 on *gaudium* and *voluptas*. We have already considered this letter in Chapter 2, where we observed that Ep. 59 muddles the distinction between *voluptas* and *gaudium*. But let us skip ahead to Ep. 61, in which the philosophical theme is once again death.

Letter 61 begins with a meditation on death:

\[\text{Desinamus quod voluimus velle. Ego certe id ago <ne> senex eadem velim quae puer volui. In hoc unum eunt dies, in hoc noctes, hoc opus meum est, haec cogitatio, inponere veteribus malis finem. Id ago ut mihi instar totius vitae dies sit; nec mehercules tamquam ultimum rapio, sed sic illum aspicio tamquam esse vel ultimus possit. Hoc animo tibi hanc epistulam scribo, tamquam me cum maxime scribentem mors evocatura sit; paratus exire sum, et ideo fruar vita quia quam diu futurum hoc sit non nimis pendeo. (61.1-2)}\]

[Let us stop wanting what we want. For my part, I am working so that as an old man I do not want the same things I wanted as a boy. All of my days are devoted to this one purpose, all my nights: this work, this meditation, is mine to do, to put an end to my ingrained vices. I behave as if a day is like an entire lifetime. However, I don’t seize it as if it is my last day, but I approach it as if it could be my last. In this spirit I’m writing this letter to you: with the thought that death could call for me when I am writing so prolifically. I am prepared to die, and as a result I will enjoy my life: because I am not putting too much stock in how long my future will be.]

The first sentence is already problematic: *desinamus quod voluimus velle*. The sentence espouses cessation, yet the entirety of it is suffused with desire: the jussive *desinamus* and the redundant verbs *voluimus* and *velle*. The sentence, then reads rather like “we want to stop wanting what we want.” It reveals that desire exists at multiple levels: desire can be governed only by a desire to stop. Thus the Stoic project to root out desire is revealed as much more complex and difficult than it first appears.

In the remainder of the passage Seneca prepares for death. Already an old man (*senex*), Seneca is rehearsing his death. Like Pacuvius in Ep. 12, Seneca makes

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\[\text{On structure and thematic echoes in the set Epp. 60-62: Maurach (1970) 11-17.}\]
death a nightly ritual by equating a day with a life: *Id ago ut mibi instar totius vitae dies sit.* Moreover, he equates his life with the letter: *scribo, tamquam me cum maxime sribentem mors evocatura sit.* The *vale* of each letter, then, is Seneca practicing his death. Indeed, in the final few sentences of the letter Seneca delivers his last words: *Vixi, Lucili carissime, quantum satis erat; martem plenus expecto. Vale.* [I have lived, dearest Lucilius, long enough. I am sated, and I look forward to death. Farewell.] With those words Seneca ends the letter, and ostensibly his life. Seneca’s choice of language is important. He has lived *quantum satis erat,* and he is now *plenus.* The moment of death finds Seneca satisfied. We may contrast this final sentence of the letter with the first: *desinamus quod voluimus velle.* This initial sentence is inextricably mired in the various levels of desire; even the cessation of desire is a desire. What the final sentence, and death, offers is a reprieve from desire, an opportunity to be freed from desire. *Velle* is transformed by death into *satis* and *plenus.* Paradoxically, however, this depiction of death as a site freed from desire is itself highly desirable. This letter, then, inculcates a desire for death by virtue of the very absence of desire in death.

Seneca has died once again, but it seems, this time, with some finality. Perhaps this is the end of Book Six. But there is one more short letter: 62. Has Seneca come back to life? The salutation implies so: *Seneca Lucilio suo salutem.* [Seneca sends well wishes to Lucilius.] And Seneca’s first word is infuriating: *mentiuntur.* They lied to you: rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated. But as we proceed through the letter, we note that Seneca has changed. *Vaco, Lucili, vaco, et ubicumque sum, ibi meus sum.* [I’m free, Lucilius, I’m free, and wherever I am, I’m my own man.] Where exactly is Seneca? He seems constantly to be shifting position. Two lines later: *et quocumque constiti loco.* Four lines later: *ad illos [amicos], in quocumque loco, in quocumque saeculo fuerunt, animum meum mitto.* Seneca is constantly “wherever”. But the philosophical point of this letter is that physical location does not matter, since with the mind we may make any of our companions present for us. This “wherever”
Seneca who has escaped the bounds of place and time seems to exemplify the malleable afterlife of the soul.\textsuperscript{23} Perhaps, then, Ep. 62 is yet another description of the experience of the soul in the afterlife. It is an epilogue of sorts to Ep. 61: in Ep. 61 Seneca bids us adieu and passes on. In Ep. 62 he speaks to us as if from beyond the grave: don’t fret that I’m gone, for I can recall my friends to me in thoughts (and so you should me). We may call our teacher Seneca to mind whenever we need him.\textsuperscript{24} And so ends Book Six.

And then Book Seven begins afresh. Despite his assertions of being dead, Seneca cannot escape from the text, nor can we from him. Seneca is everpresent in the text: dying, then returning with every letter. He dies at least twice in Book Six, and he tries again at the end of Book Seven, Ep. 69:

\begin{quote}
Si me quidem velis audire, hoc meditare et exerce, ut mortem et excipias et, si ita res suadebit, accersas. Interest nihil, illa ad nos veniat an ad illam nos. Illud imperitissimi cuiusque verbum falsum esse tibi ipse persuade: Bella res est mori sua morte. Nemo moritur nisi sua morte. Illud praeterea tecom licet cogites: nemo nisi suo die moritur. Nihil perdis ex tuo tempore; nam quod relinquis, alienum est. Vale. (69.6)
\end{quote}

[If you really want to understand me, consider and do this: welcome death and, if the situation should persuade you thus, seek it out. There’s no difference whether it comes to us or we to it. Convince yourself that this saying of the ignorant is untrue: “It’s a lovely matter to die by one’s own death.” No one dies except by his own death. Moreover, you should consider this: no one dies except on his own day. You lose nothing from your own time; for what you leave behind is not yours anyways. Farewell.]

As before, he discusses suicide, then says his farewell. And then in the manuscript there is a notation: an \textit{explicit}, marking the end of a book. Perhaps this is it, then. Maybe our Seneca is really gone. A long silence follows... But then there he is again:

\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, first Hadot (1995) 57-58, then Davidson (1994) 71 develop the notion that the \textit{sapiens}, beginning with Socrates, is made \textit{atopos} (“strange”, “unclassifiable”, literally, “without place”) by his devotion to philosophy.

\textsuperscript{24} Seneca espouses calling one’s teachers and sages before one’s mind eye in the practice of ethics: Ep. 10.
an *incipit* in the manuscript, marking the beginning of Book Eight. And soon there is
the salutation, *salutem dicit*. And then there is Seneca’s voice: *Post intervalum Pompeios
tuos vidi* (70.1). [After a long interval I have seen your Pompeii.] Indeed, after a long
interval Seneca has seen his friend Lucilius. And yet Letter 70 is about suicide. No
sooner has Seneca come back than he is preparing to take his leave once again.

Thus we observe that Seneca repeatedly strives for death, but never acquires
it. Every *vale* is answered by a *Seneca Lucilio suo salutem*. Moreover the collection of
*Letters* is itself unfinished. Because of an accident of history, the manuscript for the
*Letters* tapers off. We know that there were several more books because portions of a
letter from Book 22 are preserved in a quotation by Aulus Gellius. The end our
manuscript, then, is not the end of the *Letters*. In this sense, too, Seneca lives on after
the end of Letter 124.

Seneca, then, never acquires the pleasure that Marcia’s son experiences as he
travels up to the aether after death. What we and Seneca experience, rather, is the
pleasure of contemplating and reading about the experience of death. Death is
presented as a site of pleasure which is unalloyed by the problems of bodies and
words. We will recall from Chapter 3 that Marcia’s son was molested by both bodies
and words on his way to the aether: Seneca’s description of the sexual assaults that
Marcia’s son escapes through his early death reifies the very assaults he is to have
escaped. However, the son’s experience in the afterlife is devoid of such dangers.
Death is paradoxically figured as both an escape from the dangers of the pleasures of
the body and the word, but also as a site of pleasure and a state to be desired on
account of this lack of bodily pleasure. In the next chapter we will further explore
the desire for death, as death is presented as the perfection of doing philosophy.
CHAPTER 5

AMOR RATIONIS

The previous chapters have explored the arousal of pleasure in some unexpected places in Seneca’s work. Bodies in Seneca’s texts are corrupted by pleasure in the eroticization of the experience of reading and the perversion of the age-old metaphor of philosophy as medicine. The metaphor of the corpus—through which the physical body and the textual body corrupt and infect each other with their vices—further complicates the philosophy of pleasure and makes this pleasure both omnipresent and foundational for Stoic ethics. Moreover, the corrupt text and its corrupt author also corrupt their reader. Reading Seneca, it appears, is about as good a remedy for pleasure as a trip to the brothel. But all is not lost, Seneca reminds us. We can always kill ourselves. Death is presented as a solution to the problem of pleasure and desire in which bodies and words embroil us. The afterlife, devoid of physical bodies and words, offers a direct communion with philosophy free of intrusions. Marcia’s father and her son, for example, are depicted without desire, enjoying the universal knowledge which the afterlife offers.

This universal knowledge is expressed alternately as simply philosophia, or, more specifically, ratio. Ratio serves a particularly important role in Stoic philosophy. As the reason which permeates the cosmos, it determines the makeup of individual physical objects and beings, it is the reasoning capacity present in humans, and it is
finally the cosmic order of events and occurrences. One should remember, however, that all of these different appearances of *ratio* are but a singular *ratio*. Thus the *ratio* which determines the course of events in the cosmos is also our own reasoning capacity. This is the reason why Stoic ethics prescribes that we follow our reason: by acting in accordance with our reason, we also act in accordance with the cosmic order of events.

*Ratio*, then, is offered as the solution to our ethical difficulties, providing us with a way out of this bind via the metaphorical language which has landed us here in the first place. *Ratio* is proposed as the solution for the pleasure of the *corpus*. Whereas the manifold signification of *corpus* opens up and exposes discourses to be infected by pleasure (the physical body, the literary body), the manifold signification of *ratio* proposes to stop the spread of pleasure by subsuming all discourses under the single umbrella of *ratio*. *Ratio* in Seneca’s ethics promises to close up the endless streams of signification and metaphor which incite pleasure. It is the unifying principle through which ethical behavior—and the extirpation of pleasure—is achieved. In Letter 66 Seneca explains how *ratio* unifies:

Sola ratio inmutabilis et iudicii tenax est; non enim servit sed imperat sensibus. Ratio racioni par est, sicut rectum recto; ergo et virtus virtuti; nihil enim alid est virtus quam recta ratio. Omnes virtutes rationes sunt; rationes sunt, si rectae sunt; si rectae sunt, et pares sunt. Qualis ratio est, tales et actiones sunt; ergo omnes pares sunt; nam cum similes rationi sint, similes inter se sunt. Pares autem actiones inter se esse dico qua honestae rectaeque sunt; ceterum magna habebunt discrimina variante materia, quae modo latior est, modo angustior, modo inlustris, modo ignobilis, modo ad multos pertinens, modo ad paucos. In omnibus tamen istis id quod optimum est par est: honestae sunt. (66.32-3)

[*Ratio* alone is unchanging and steadfast in good judgment. For it is not a slave to, but a master over, the senses. *Ratio* is equal to *ratio*, just as

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1 L&S 44, 53, 46, respectively. Akinpelu (1968) is often incorrect and inadvertently casts Seneca as a closeted Christian.
rectitude is equal to rectitude, and therefore virtue is equal to virtue. I make this claim because:

virtue is nothing other than correct ratio.
All the virtues are rationes.
They are rationes, if they are correct.
If they are correct, they are also equal.
As ratio is, so also are the practices.
Therefore all of these are equal.

For when they are like ratio, then they are alike amongst themselves. However, I term practices to be “equal” amongst themselves to the extent that they are honest and correct. The rest will be in very great distinction among themselves because of their different matter, which is at times broader, at times narrower, at times illustrious, at times obscure, at times relating to much, at times to few. Nonetheless, in all of these practices, whatever is best is equal: they are honest.

Thus ratio works its ethics through a process of equalization. Through a series of equalizations (par est), it unites our practices (actiones) with virtue (virtus), thereby accomplishing the Stoic ethical project. The passage achieves this in three basic moves: 1) ratio is equal to itself, rectum is equal to itself, and virtus is equal to itself; 2) these three qualities (ratio, rectum, virtus) are all equal to each other; 3) ratio is equal to honestae rectaeque actiones. All four of these qualities, then, are equal to each other. And all else is unequal (magna habebunt discrimina). Ratio is forever unchanging and steadfast, and the identification of the other three qualities with it leads to the success of the ethical project. In this way ratio functions through a series of equalizations. Indeed, these identifications function not only in the branch of ethics, but also in logic: this chain of equalization is a syllogism. The chain may also be expressed as: 1) \(x = x, y = y, z = z\); 2) \(x = y = z\); 3) \(x = a\); therefore \(x = y = z = a\). The syllogism succeeds, with one point following the previous. The first move establishes identity, the second asserts their mutual identification, and the third adds a new element which may be identified with the other three. Thus ratio exhibits the

\(^2\) Contrast with metaphor (like that of the corpus), which creates difference (magna discrimina) at each pitstop along the way. Such is the power of ratio: it overcomes the sliding of the signifier/signified relationship to achieve a pure, concrete identification between two objects.
flawless functioning in both the ethical and logical spheres. It accomplishes this through its principle of equality.

This principle of equality, however, finds expression in the Letters through the metaphor of economy and commerce.² Already in Letter 1 Seneca establishes the mantra for the Letters, to keep an eye on our books.³ In Ep. 1 it is time which should be measured. We should put a price on our time (aliquod pretium tempori ponat), value the day (diem aestimet), since time alone is ours, while all else is indebted (Omnia, Lucili, aliena sunt, tempus tantum nostrum est.) Time, then, is the one commodity one can’t buy (boc unum est quod ne gratus quidem potest reddere). So we ought to make sure our books balance (ratio mibi constat inpensae).

Moreover, time is not the only thing commodified in the Letters. Actions, words, sentences, whole letters become objects of exchange and of obsessive bookkeeping. The Letters incessantly ask: How do we return kindness? How do we translate Greek philosophy into Latin? When, and how long, do I write in return for your letter?

This striving for balance expresses itself as an eroticization of our relationship with ratio. The Letters insist that we not simply work for ratio, but that we really and truly love it:

Ama rationem! huius te amor contra durissima armabit. Feras catulorum amor in venabula inpingit feritasque et inconsultus impetus praestat indomitas; iuvenilia nonnumquam ingenia cupido gloriae in contemptum tam ferri quam ignium misit; species quosdam atque umbra virtutis in mortem voluntarium trudit: quanto his omnibus fortior ratio est, quanto constantior, tanto vehementius per metus ipsos et pericula exibit. (74.21)


[Love ratio! This kind of love will arm you against the harshest times. Although love for their young forces beasts into the line of the hunter’s spear, their animal nature and unthinking impulse makes them wild. More than once the desire for glory has compelled youthful minds to underestimate the sword as much as the fire. But the appearance and the shadow of virtue drives certain men to a voluntary death. The more reason is more powerful than all these qualities, the more it is more stable, that much more stridently it will surpass both fear itself and dangers.]

The love of ratio is depicted as more powerful and more constant, but also more violent (vehementius) than the love of mothers for her whelp and the desire of youths for military glory. This love is the sort that destroys the lover: the mothers die by the hunter, and the youths die in war. It is a passion which defies reason. And yet here it is reason itself which drives such love. This, then, is the relationship that one has with ratio.⁵ It exceeds the bounds of moderation implied by “philo-sophy.” That is, while philosophy is, literally, a love of wisdom, philia is not amor. Rather, philia translates as amicitia; eros is amor. Seneca himself is quick to point out that, while the two are similar, they are to be distinguished:

Non dubie habet aliquid simile amicitiae affectus amantium; possis dicere illam esse insanam amicitiam. Numquid ergo quisquam amat luci causa? numquid ambitionis aut gloriae? Ipse per se amor, omnium aliarum rerum negligens, animos in cupiditatem formae non sine spre mutuae caritatis accendit. (9.11)

[Without a doubt the feeling of lovers has something in common with friendship. You could call it an unhealthy friendship. Well, then, does it follow that anyone loves for money? What about for ambition or fame? Love that is for itself only rejects all other things and lights hearts afire with desire for beauty not without the hope of mutual affection.]

The distinction between amor and amicitia is that amor is an unhealthy (insana) form of amicitia. While amicitia is acceptable and healthy, amor is unhealthy and evidence of an ill soul. Nonetheless, amor is the relationship which Seneca prescribes that we

⁵ Inwood (2005) 267 n.28 acknowledges, but downplays, the force of love.
cultivate with ratio. His definition of amor here, moreover, is one which seeks ratio. True love, Seneca states, strives with the hope of a return (non sine spe nutuae caritatis). It is, in economic terms, a loan which one desires to be repaid. We have also, then, ratio amoris. Like the other rationes, it too seeks the balance: mutual affection.

Seneca thus instructs us to truly and madly love reason. This sort of love is to take the place of the bodily pleasures in our lives. This love, then, is the redirect of our love for Seneca the author in Chapter 2, and the pleasures of the body enjoyed with Dr. Seneca in Chapter 3. Thus love of pure reason is advocated. But as we noted in Chapter 4, the consummation of this love (ratio amoris) will be possible only in death. In this chapter we will discover that our love of reason/balance (amor rationis) always leaves us in the red, perpetuating our desire for it and deferring the moment of consummation to the afterlife—a reliable, yet ever-removed locus. We will begin by exploring the various forms of our unrequited amor rationis in the Letters: ethical activity; translation; epistolary exchange. We will close by considering the effect and purpose of such unrequited amor rationis.

The rejection of unproductive concerns (such as health, wealth, and fame) is a key component of Stoic ethics. Seneca is no exception. Throughout the Letters he exhorts Lucilius to do away with his monetary concerns and to find satisfaction in poverty. In doing so he utilizes commercial language to transition Lucilius from the commerce of money to the commerce of virtuous activities.

This transition is most explicit in Letter 17. Lucilius has been preoccupied with his monetary situation, and Seneca responds by steering him towards philosophy. Philosophy, he claims, enriches every part of a man’s life. Then, he

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6 Amor for philosophical activity is also espoused at Epp. 71.5, 82.1, 94.8, 115.6.  
7 L&S 58.
advises: *Mihi crede, advoca illam in consilium: suadebit tibi ne ad calculos sedeas.* (17.2) [Trust me. Call in philosophy for help: it will dissuade you from sitting at your calculator.] Philosophy, then, steers us away from monetary calculation, and teaches us to be content with having enough. The exchange of money is not to be a concern for Lucilius. But *calculos* is not the only financial term in this sentence. *Crede,* too has a monetary valence: *to lend money to, give credit.* Lucilius is not to occupy himself with monetary commerce, and *crede* encourages a metaphorical transition to a different sort of commerce, philosophical commerce. Lucilius should put his stock not in the financial world, but in the philosophical; while financial wealth distracts and aggravates, philosophical wealth leads to philosophical progress. More specifically, however, Lucilius is also ordered to put his stock in Seneca: *mihi crede.* Thus already the monetary exchange with philosophy is mediated by an exchange with Seneca.

Again in Letter 87 Seneca uses commercial language to effect a transition from monetary exchange to virtuous exchange. He berates the masses for their obsessive calculation of monetary wealth:

‘*insanitis, erratis, stupetis ad supervacuas, neminem aestimatis suo.* Cum ad patrimonium ventum est, diligentissimi computatores sic rationem ponitis singulorum quibus aut pecuniam credituri estis aut beneficia (nam haec quoque iam expensa fertis): late possidet, sed multum debet; habet domum formasam, sed alienis nummis paratam; familia nemo cito speciosiorem producet, sed nominibus non respondet; si creditoribus solverit, nihil illi supererit. Idem in reliquis quoque facere deebritis et excutere quantum proprii quisque habeat.’

... cum omnia dixeris, pauper est. Quare? quia debet. *‘Quantum?’* inquis. Omnia; nisi forte iudicas interesse utrum aliquis ab homine an a fortuna mutuum sumpserit. (87.5-8)

[‘You’re insane, you’re wrong, you’re amazed at superfluous things, and you assess no one on his own merits. When it comes to estates, like the most careful accountants you write up the accounts of each man to whom you would loan either money or favors (for even the latter you count as expenses nowadays). He owns much, but he owes much. He has a lovely home, but it was built with borrowed money. No one will produce a more noticeable retinue quickly, but he will not pay his debts. And if he ever pays his debts, he will have nothing left. You will have to do the same to the rest of them as well, and investigate what, and how much, each of them has that is their own.’ ... Despite all the possessions you’ve listed, he’s poor. Why? Because he’s in debt. ‘How
much?’ you ask. All of it; that is, unless you happen to think that there’s a difference between borrowing money from a man or from fate.] These offenders do their math wrong (neminem aestimatis suo), Seneca claims, when they look to men’s possessions to determine their wealth. Adding up the assets and debts, these mistaken accountants inspect others’ fitness for a loan. This is the incorrect way of going about amor rationis: while proper accounting is the goal of amor rationis, Seneca emphasizes that this accounting is not financial. Moreover, this method is doubly mistaken in Seneca’s eyes not only because wealth is not a sufficient indication of virtue, but also because all possessions and wealth are borrowed from fate. That is, fate may choose to call in these debts at any time, and thus these possessions do not in fact belong to them. Throughout the passage Seneca uses financial vocabulary: aestimatis, patrimonium, computatores, rationem ponitis, pecuniam credituri, debet, alienis nummis, nomibus respondet, creditoribus solverit, mutuum sumpserit. The first and last of these (aestimatis, mutuum sumpserit), however, here refer to ethical calculation. Seneca asserts that to look to financial assets is to not assess (aestimo) someone on his own merits. That is, the assessment that is referred to here is one of virtue. Similarly, mutuum sumpserit facilitates the transition of calculation from the financial arena (ab homine) to the ethical (a fortuna). In this way Seneca uses financial language to move from monetary to ethical discourse. Similarly, the act of calculation and accounting is moved from the monetary to the ethical arena. But what is ethical calculation, and how is it done?

To Lucilius’ great fortune, Seneca offers him a guide to ethical economy in Letter 81. In it Seneca tries to balance out good deeds with bad deeds: explicatum est, an is qui profuit nobis, si postea nocuit, paria fecerit et nos debito solverit. (81.3) [We need to explicate whether someone who helped us, then later harmed us, has set things equal

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8 On this letter see also Inwood (2005) 76-81.
and settled his debt with us.] A simple question, then: when do positives and negatives cancel out, and how do we measure their magnitude? Seneca first offers the answer of a strict judge: *quamvis iniuriae praeponderent, tamen beneficis donetur quod ex iniuria superest* (81.4). [Although the wrongs are more serious, nonetheless we should count what is left after the wrongs toward the benefits.] This judge then strictly counts the quantity of wrongs versus benefits, such that a wrong of great magnitude is still equal to a benefit of small magnitude. But Seneca finds this method of calculation unsatisfactory because it does not account for the sequence of benefits and wrongs: *Plus nocuit, sed prius profuit; itaque habeatur et temporis ratio* (81.4). [He was more harmful, but was earlier helpful; therefore we should also consider the rationale of time.] And so Seneca has complicated the easy one-to-one equivalence of wrongs to benefits by introducing time as a factor. But then Seneca introduces yet another factor for consideration: *Iam illa manifestiora sunt quam ut admoneri debes quae suerunt esse quam libenter profuerit, quam invitus nocuerit, quoniam animo et benefici et iniuriae constant* (81.5). [Now, these circumstances are too obvious for me to have to remind you that you need to consider how willingly he helped you, or how unwillingly he harmed you, since both benefits and wrongs lie in the intention of the doer.] Now Lucilius must add to his list of criteria the spirit in which the act was performed. This last factor is certainly unquantifiable. So at this point Lucilius’ one-to-one calculations of benefits and wrongs have been complicated by factors of magnitude, time, and intention. It turns out that it is more difficult to fulfill the *amor rationis* than one might expect.

Lucilius is surely overwhelmed. Can he master Stoic friendship economy? As it turns out, no. Only the wise man can: *Itaque negamus quemquam scire gratiam referre nisi sapientem, non magis quam beneficium dare quisquam scit nisi sapiens* (81.10). [And so we say that no one except the wise man knows how to return a favor, nor does anyone but the wise man know how to confer a benefit.] Thus calculation has gotten very
difficult indeed. Lucilius and we other proficiens have progressed a long way from 17.2: Mihi crede, advoca illam in consilium: suadebit tibi ne ad calculos sedeas. (17.2) [Trust me. Call in philosophy for help: it will dissuade you from sitting at your calculator.]

While Ep. 17 implants in us the desire for ratio, by Ep. 81 we learn that the realization of the amor is impossible for all but the sapiens. Balancing our ethical books is impossible, and the amor rationis remains unfulfilled: only the wise man gains his love-object.

The desire for ratio also manifests itself in the exchange of Latin terminology for Greek terminology, that is, the act of translation and signification. In Chapter 2 we have already explored the difficulties of significatio to some extent.9 Letter 59 provided a foundation for the discussion of the impossibility of perfect significatio: neither Vergil, Seneca, or Lucilius were able fully to equate word with meaning. In Letter 45 the discussion of significatio employs financial terminology:

Venit ad me pro amico blandus inimicus; vitia nobis sub virtutum nomine obrepunt: temeritas sub titulo fortitudinis latet, moderatio vocatur ignavia, pro cauto timidus accipitur. In his magno periculo erramus: bis certas notas imprime. (45.7)

[A flattering enemy comes to me as a friend. Vices sneak up on us in the name of virtues: cowardice hides under the label of courage, laziness is called moderation, the coward is taken as cautious. On account of these difficulties we make mistakes to our great detriment. So stamp fixed signs upon these.]

The importance of proper significatio for the practice of ethics is stressed. Without the proper relationship between words and things, vices are mistaken for virtues, cowardice for courage, and the like. That is, the distinctions between objects disappear when the same word is used for different objects. Thus the one-to-one

9 Stoic doctrine on significatio: L&S 32.
relationship between word and thing must be maintained, and words must be defined properly. In this way the business of words returns again to ratio.

In this economy of words, the word—as a medium of exchange—serves as currency. The final phrase, certas notas imprime, effects this shift. The economic phrase means “stamp fixed currency.” But Seneca applies it here to the process of signification: “let your words be true.” Seneca stresses that this currency must hold its value. Without stability, the economy breaks down: logic doesn’t work, nor ethics. And yet we have already observed in Letter 59 that this currency is difficult to fix. Seneca’s injunction seems already to be in danger.

Let us examine a particular type of significatio, translatio, to test the fixity of this currency of words. Seneca translates Greek philosophical terminology into Latin at several points during the Letters. In Letter 9 Seneca worries about how to translate the Greek word ἀπάθεια. A literal translation results in the Latin word impatientia, but Seneca deems it unacceptable because it may also mean the opposite of the Greek. He defines the Greek term to mean: qui respuat omnis mali sensum [one who rejects the sensation of all evil] (9.2). The Latin term impatientia, however, can mean: qui nullum ferre possit malum [one who can endure no evil] (9.2). Instead, he suggests invulnerabilem animum or animum extra omnem patientiam, both of which capture the meaning better, but are multiple-word phrases. The act of directly translating one Greek word into one Latin word proves to be quite difficult. Again, the issues of meaning and wanting to mean come to the fore: poterit enim contratium ei quod significare volumus intellegi [for it could signify the opposite of what we want to

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10 Also at: Epp. 58 and 111, as well as De Tranquillitate Animi 2.3. On Senecan translation: Grimal (1992); Henderson (2004) 147-149; Inwood (2005) 18-22. These provide excellent assessments of Seneca’s success in translating, and of the import of the Latin language to Seneca’s philosophical program. I am not so much concerned with retreading this ground as with a consideration of how Seneca’s restaging of the process of translation, and his worrying of the equivalence between Greek and Latin, reflects the economy of words.

11 On this troublesome word: Kaster (2002).
be understood] (9.2). As we have observed in the Chapter 2, the difficulty of *significatio* is the discrepancy between *significare* and *velle (significare)*, the inability of our ability to equal our desire. In the end, then, Seneca’s problem of translating ἀπάθεια is also a problem of *ratio*. Seneca cannot make the Latin terms in his ledger equal the Greek terms.

In Letter 58, Seneca continues the financial metaphor of words as currency and attributes the difficulty of signification and translation to the poverty of the Latin language:  

12 *Quanta verborum nobis paupertas, immo egestas sit, numquam magis quam hodierno die intellexi* [I have never really appreciated the extent of our poverty—rather, destitution—of words more than today] (§8.1). The paucity of Latin words, then, is to blame for Seneca’s inability to translate directly from Greek into Latin. He explains that many words in Plato have no equivalent in Latin: *nomina desiderarent* (§8.1). Thus the poverty of Latin always leaves us short on currency and in a state of desire.

This poverty becomes problematic in the explication of Platonic metaphysics which follows. Seneca lays out the problem first: how to translate ὀὐσία into Latin? A coinage is necessary, one which he attributes to Cicero: *essentia*. Seneca continues the metaphor in describing Cicero as *locuples*: Cicero’s largesse, then, augments the poverty of the Latin language. Seneca, however, is unable to duplicate Cicero. He cannot satisfactorily translate τὸ ὅν. He does not approve of the standard *quod est*,

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12 This claim—that the Latin language, due to its smaller vocabulary, is unable to express itself—is made throughout Roman literature. Henderson (2004) 150; Segal (1983) 175 have investigated it in Seneca. Again, my interest lies not in the veracity of this claim in Seneca, but rather in his use of the trope of poverty within the financial metaphor for language. I suspect, however, that the trope of the poverty of the Latin language is not unrelated to the valorization of poverty in Roman moralistic literature—philosophy and satire.
since it expresses a Greek noun with a Latin verb (58.7). Once again Seneca is unable to balance his Greek and Latin accountbook.

But Letter 58 is not about only the translation from Greek terms to Latin terms. Indeed, there are several processes of translation attempted in the letter. There is first the translation of terminology. In addition, the letter is an explication of Platonic metaphysics. Thus it attempts to translate (meta)physics to words, logic. Finally, it translates Plato / Academic thought to Stoic thought. In sum, the letter is an act of tri-partite translation: Greek Platonic metaphysics to Latin Stoic logic. In particular, the move from Platonic metaphysics to Stoic logic raises a further issue of signification. The primary difference between Platonic and Stoic metaphysics is the Platonic Forms as contrasted with Stoic absolute materialism. While the Stoics allow some immaterials in their schema, they do not posit a Form for all particulars, as the Platonists do. The Forms, then, have no equivalent in Stoic metaphysics. Further, the Forms have no substance, no material. To express the Forms in words is to stamp strange currency. The words which express the Forms as currency hold no value: they represent no substance, no material. How are we to ensure the value of currency which stands for an object which is intangible, invisible? And yet the irony of this currency is that, since the Forms are everlasting and unchanging, this currency never loses its value: it will always represent the same object. While other words-currency have either failed to be accessible (poverty of the Latin language) or failed

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13 Seneca classifies the Greek τὸ ὄν as a noun (vocabulum), and the Latin quod est as a verb (verbum). The second classification seems odd and problematic. Seneca may mean phrase instead of verb by verbum. In any case, Seneca’s objection still stands: since Latin has no article, the Greek must be expressed through periphrasis.


15 The Stoics do refer to ennoëmata (“universals”), which may refer to an overarching concept or thought, such as “man”. On ennoëmata: L&S 30. The evidence we have for ennoëmata is somewhat late, and the dissemination of this concept is unclear. In any case, Seneca in Ep. 58 neglects to mention them.
to hold their value (changing / lost vocabulary: 58.2-4), the signification of Platonic Forms in Stoic terms presents the possibility of the perfect currency. But, as Seneca himself says throughout the letter about signification, “nullo modo possim”, “non possum”. This perfect currency, the translation of Greek Platonic metaphysics to Latin Stoic logic, is impossible. Seneca has staged the difficulty of translating the terminology itself. Thus this impossibility of perfect currency reiterates Seneca’s complaint about the poverty of Latin vocabulary. As we have observed above regarding beneficia, the exchange of words, too, is fated to disappoint.

Finally, Seneca employs the financial metaphor in the arena of epistolary exchange as well. Letters, and parts of letters, function as currency which is borrowed, owed, and paid. The existence of this metaphor in reference to the thought-of-the-day quotations in the first three books is well-documented. Here we will examine it with respect to the familiar refrain, ratio constat. Do the quotations adhere to the principle of proper calculation which aims at balance?

In Letter 6 Seneca first uses financial language in reference to the thought-of-the-day: Interim quoniam diurnam tibi mercedulam debeo, quid me hodie apud Hecatonem delectaverit dicam. (6.7) [In the meantime, since I owe you the daily fee, I’ll tell you what I liked today in the writings of Hecato.] A debt is owed to Lucilius. Moreover, it is a daily fee: with each new letter, a new debt is incurred. That this is the structure of the debt is confirmed by a quick scan of Letters 2-5. Just as Seneca here offers a quotation of Hecato to resolve his debt, at 2.5 he offers a quotation of Epicurus, at 3.4 a quotation of Pomponius, at 4.10 one from an Epicurean, and at 5.7 one of Hecato. For every letter Seneca sends to Lucilius, he must also send him a

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philosophical thought-of-the-day. This commerce of letters and quotations continues through the entirety of the first three books (Letters 1-29).

But already in Letter 7, the commerce grows complicated. Seneca wants to prepay:

Sed ne soli mihi hodie didicerim, communicabo tecum quae occurrunt mihi egregie dicta circa eundem fere sensum tria, ex quibus unum haec epistula in debitum solvet, duo in antecessum accipe. (7.10)

[But so that I have not learned for only myself today, I will tell you which sayings particularly appealed to me. Three with nearly the same meaning: this letter will apply one against its debt; count the other two to my credit.]

He offers one quotation from Democritus, one from an anonymous author, and one from Epicurus. By paying ahead of the successive letters Seneca is destabilizing the balance: now Lucilius must put down two quotations to Seneca’s credit in his ledger. Moreover, the content of the quotations themselves pose their own challenges for calculation:

Democritus: ‘unus mihi pro populo est, et populus pro uno’.
[“As I see it, one is the equivalent of the people, and the people the equivalent of one.”]

Quisquis: ‘satis sunt...mihi pauci, satis est unus, satis est nullus’.
[“For me, a few are enough, one is enough, none is enough.”]

Epicurus: ‘haec...ego non multis, sed tibi; satis enim magnum alter alteri theatrum sumus.’
[“I write these things not for the benefit of many, but for you; because we are a large enough audience for each other.”]

All three of the quotations deal with numbers, and all three have their own numerical paradox. These quotations are reminiscent of the paradoxes for which the Stoics were infamous: illogical statements which find their meaning within Stoic doctrine. Similarly, these quotations present a numerical non-logic which only Stoic ethics can disentangle.17 Democritus claims that one man is the equivalent of the people, that

17 None (though the identity of the second author is unknown) of these philosophers are Stoics. Is there then also another sort of game being played here, more than the mere “mathematical”? If the
is, that one equals many. Just as one-over-many logic makes its own sense in Plato, one-equals-many makes its own sense in Stoicism. This letter is, after all, about the danger of the crowd. So Seneca interprets Democritus to mean that one person of quality is of as much value as an entire crowd. Thus mathematical fallacy finds its truth in Stoic ethics. In the second quotation, the author doubly engages in illogic. First, he defines *satis* as three different numbers. However, even if we except this inconsistency as a change or evolution in thought, the final phrase is still a paradox: none is enough. The paradox, to be explicit, is that a null set occupies the place of a number. Again, Stoic ethics can make sense of this seeming nonsense and make the accounts balance. This quotation is a restatement of Democritus': in essence, solitude is satisfactory. Lastly, the quotation from Epicurus also engages in the same sentiment: the company of one other is sufficient audience. Again, there is a numerical inconsistency between the singulars *tibi* / *alter alteri* and the vocabulary of multitudes, *satis* / *theatrum*. And again, there is the principle of (n)one is enough. In both statements, any number—indeed, no number—is always sufficient. It is then in the nature of both of these statements that numbers get confused with each other and lose their identity. But it is only through this fluidity that Stoic ethics is able to achieve its feat of calculating the incalculable.

The commerce of quotations is complicated again in Letter 8. At 8.7, Seneca states that he will resolve his debt to Lucilius with a quotation of Epicurus. But has he not already prepaid for two letters in Letter 7? And then, at 8.9, Seneca presents another quotation to Lucilius, this time from Publilius. And to this one he tacks on two by Lucilius himself. In toto Seneca has now given four quotations, then, in *paradoxa Epicureorum* can only find their logic within Stoic ethics, does Seneca present here Stoicism as the standard through which all philosophies can be understood, and under which all philosophies are to be subsumed? Thus Seneca claims in Letter 8 that all quotations are “common property” (*voces publicas*), and appropriates Epicurus. (See also at *Ep*. 16.) Then does this mathematical game amount to much more, a politics of philosophy played out at the level of logic and ethics?
addition to the two he has prepaid. Luckily for Lucilius, he admits that two cannot be used to pay his debts: *Hoc non inputo in solutum: de tuo tibi.* (8.10) [I do not count this one toward the debt: it is from you, for you.] The last two quotations are by Lucilius, but Seneca refers only to one quotation: *hoc.* So there is incongruity between the two halves of the sentence. The first half removes one quotation, while the second half removes two. Already again we are falling into accounting difficulties. And this ambiguity is compounded with the existing difficulties of calculating Seneca’s debt. What is poor Lucilius to do? Perhaps the economy of quotations is not so simple after all, and perhaps it is difficult to balance one’s account of quotations after all.

Letter 8 also underscores another problem in the calculation of quotations. Seneca confesses that he has taken two quotations from Lucilius himself. By their nature quotations are not Seneca’s own currency. That is, he is paying off his debt to Lucilius with borrowed money. Thus Seneca, who so proudly claims in Ep. 1 that *ratio mibi constat inpensae,* is actually robbing Peter to pay Paul. The vast majority of his quotations, he admits are from Epicurus. At Ep. 8.8, however, he attempts to justify his debt. He claims that they belong to everyone (*voces…publicas*). And yet the next line he quotes is revealing: *alienum est omne, quicquid optando evenit.* [Whatever happens out of wishing is all indebted.] Although Seneca ostensibly quotes this line of Publilius as advice not to count accidents of fortune as ours, the line also reflects Seneca’s borrowing of quotations. That is, just because Seneca wishes it so, it does not mean that these quotations are indeed common property. Seneca wishing it so does not make his account balance.

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19 Reynolds’ OCT v.2 pp. 543-544 provides a very useful index scriptorum, though it includes both quotations-of-the-day and run-of-the-mill quotations. Setaioli (1988) is a thorough study of these quotations.
And there is more: the commerce of quotations gives poor Lucilius not only a headache, but also heartache. The commerce of quotations becomes a site of desire. As the motif develops throughout the books, Seneca remarks on Lucilius’ eagerness for the thought-of-the-day: Video quo spectes: quaeris quid huic epistulae infusserim, quod dictum alicuius animosum, quod praeceptum utile (24.22). [I see where you direct your gaze: you’re looking for that thing that I’ve crammed into this letter, that is, some envigorating saying by some philosopher, or some useful precept.] Seneca recognizes what has by now become habit for Lucilius: as the letter winds down, Lucilius awaits his quotation/payment. Seneca then provides Lucilius with his long-awaited quotation by Epicurus. By the end of Book Three (Letter 29), Seneca is resenting these payments. Although he pays Lucilius with a quotation from Epicurus, he chastises him all the same: Si pudorem haberes, ultimam mihi pensionem remisisses; sed ne ego quidem me sordide geram in finem aeris alieni et tibi quod debet inpingam (29.10). [If you had any shame, you would have released me of this last payment. But not even I will behave greedily in closing out this debt, and I will force what I owe upon you.] As he implies here, Seneca ceases to provide Lucilius with quotations in the next letter, Letter 30, which opens Book Four: this trend continues through Letter 32.20 At the opening of Letter 33, Seneca responds as if to answer a complaint from Lucilius about the lack of quotations: Desideras his quoque epistulis sicut prioribus adscribi aliquas voces nostrorum procerum (33.1). [You want me, in these letters as in previous ones, to include some quotations from our top philosophers.] Lucilius’ latent craving for quotations has now been fully exposed; Lucilius is striken by amor rationis.21 Seneca claims that Lucilius desires these quotations. This verb, then, is an acknowledgement

20 Also Cancik (1967) 143.

of the pleasure previously derived from these quotations: if they were not pleasant, after all, why would Lucilius be so eager for them now? And, like a Stoic nightmare, Lucilius has gotten caught up in experiencing human pleasures, and their removal causes him distress. It is for the avoidance of this situation, after all, that the Stoic eschews pleasure. And looking back at Letters 24, 29-33 as a unit, we may appreciate the narrative which Seneca constructs: Lucilius seeks out (Letter 24), acquires and does not relinquish (Letter 29) the quotations, and the pleasure he derives from them. Thus when he is deprived of them (Letters 30-32), he is left in a state of lack and desire (Letter 33).

There are markedly fewer thoughts-of-the-day throughout the rest of the Letters. Seneca owes Lucilius many thoughts-of-the-day. The balance which Lucilius has been trying to keep all along runs amok: the ledger is all confused, but what is clear is that Seneca must surely owe him much. Lucilius is now in a state of lack, twice over. Not only does he miss the thoughts-of-the-day, but he has also thereby failed to maintain an even balance in his ledger. The ratio of his amor with Seneca and his quotations does not balance. The economy of quotations leaves Lucilius destitute, doubly failing to acquire the object of his amor rationis: ratio as ethical principle in the form of quotations, and ratio as the balance in his account.

Yet not only the quotations, but entire letters participate in an epistolary economy. The epistolary economy of Seneca’s Letters is clear enough: two correspondents writing to each other, typically in turn. But already there arises a discrepancy between the ideal economy depicted in the Letters and the actual collection of the Letters. That is, only Seneca’s correspondences to Lucilius are preserved. This tension between the ideal economy of epistolary which the Letters themselves insist upon and the actual economy which the Letters embody is staged by
Seneca. Thus the epistolary economy is staged by Seneca as unequal from the start. This account does not balance, either.

If this disjoint were not enough, it is expressed explicitly within the body of the *Letters*. In Letter 118 Seneca complains of Lucilius’ sporadic correspondence, using the familiar terminology of commerce:


[You want me to send letters more frequently. Let’s compare our balances: you won’t be in the black. In fact, we had agreed that yours would be first: you would write, I would write back. But I won’t be difficult: I know you’re creditworthy. So I’ll give you an advance, nor will I do what Cicero—most eloquent man that he is—orders Atticus to do, namely, even ‘if nothing is going on, write whatever comes to mind.’]

Lucilius’ and Seneca’s accounts (*rationes*) are uneven. Lucilius is in debt, and yet demands more from Seneca. Nonetheless Seneca obliges, trusting that Lucilius will one day pay what he owes. Or so Seneca claims. True, we have no letters from Lucilius. Nonetheless, Seneca’s rhetoric smacks of a rich equestrian pointing out a pauper’s debts. Regardless of whether Lucilius has paid off his debts, Seneca makes Lucilius feel indebted. Seneca then shows himself the generous creditor. This is all vaguely patronizing. But it leaves Lucilius feeling that he owes Seneca. The exchange of letters is explicitly a commercial exchange. Moreover, Seneca reiterates that his letters are not counterfeit currency when he rejects the Ciceronian suggestion to write, basically, about nothing. In this epistolary economy Seneca is the one in need, whereas previously Lucilius was destitute of quotations. But in both situations, Seneca manipulates the situation such that he has the upper hand. When he stops his payment of quotations, he accuses Lucilius of being too exacting, and refuses. This time around, his portrayal of the generous creditor drives Lucilius further into
humilating debt. And the bottom line: in both situations the ratio of balance and equality is not accomplished.

This passage also establishes the letter as currency. Just as the word was previously the medium of exchange between the meaning and the object in the sphere of logic, in epistolary the letter is the medium of exchange between two individuals. Further, the letter itself is composed of letters, which themselves function as the medium of exchange for the objects they represent. A letter, then, represents at once the presence of the writer and the objects about which he writes. Seneca pledges not to print counterfeit bills. But can he fix the value of his currency? Do his letters provide an accurate account of his presence?

Perhaps they do: Seneca relates his pleasure at Lucilius’ presence conveyed via letter:

Si quando intervenerunt epistulae tuae, tecum esse mihi videor et sic adficiar animo tamquam tibi non rescribam sed respondeam. Itaque et de hoc quod quaeris, quasi conloquar tecum, quale sit una scrutabimur. (67.2)

[Whenever your letters arrive, I think that I am with you and I feel as if I should not write back to you, but respond to you. So, this thing about which you're asking, we'll look into it together as if I were conversing with you.]

In this way Lucilius’ words stand in for Lucilius’ presence. Lucilius’ letter is such true currency that it fully communicates Lucilius’ physical presence. Seneca imagines that he speaks to Lucilius rather than writes to him. Seneca, too, in writing of their conversation projects his presence: his prose communicates a scene of face-to-face interaction. As a result Lucilius-the-reader is in turn to imagine Seneca’s presence conversing with him.

Next Seneca writes down the imagined conversation, imagining Lucilius’ replies (inquis), then responding himself. But Lucilius is allowed to say very little throughout the letter. He is quoted directly three times total (§1, 3, 6), and afterwards lapses into indirect statement an additional four times (§8, 11, 12, 13). This
conversation is in fact rather uneven: Seneca does most of the talking. So while it is true that Seneca may feel Lucilius’ presence through Lucilius’ letter, Seneca’s imagined conversation begins to sound more and more like a conventional letter. His epistolary currency does not fully convey the conversation.

This issue of presence lends more weight to the absence of Lucilius’ letters from the collection. Lucilius’ absence allows us, the reader, to insert our presence into Lucilius’ place. Without Lucilius’ presence, our exchange with Seneca is not mediated by Lucilius. Thus all of Lucilius’ debts and desires are projected onto us. We are indeed the ones who feel bereft at the cessation of quotations, the ones who are made to feel in epistolary debt to Seneca.

In the commerce of letters (epistularum commercium) it has been hard to stick to Seneca’s mantra: ratio constat. We have not been able to account for all of the letters which should be included in the Epistulae Morales: with Lucilius’ letters to Seneca missing, Lucilius is in the red, Seneca in the black.22

Keep it balanced. Account for everything. These are Seneca’s mantras. By undertaking amor rationis we ought to have been able to bring this pleasure business to an end. And yet time and again the principle of ratio is unachievable. The calculation of beneficia in the ethical sphere is complicated; proper translatio in words is either impossible or false; the exchange of letters leaves either Seneca or Lucilius in debt. Indeed, Seneca tells us that only the wise man (sapiens) can properly calculate beneficia, or know precisely which term to use to express meaning. Far be it from us proficientes to be able to acquire ratio, then. Worse yet, our inability to acquire ratio only intensifies our amor for it. We envy the sapiens and his communion with ratio.

22 We also receive an additional payment from Seneca via Aulus Gellius NA 12.2.2. But here Gellius quotes Seneca, effectively turning Seneca himself into the vox publica which Seneca had claimed of Epicurus.
Why, then, does Letter 66 establish and encourage this *amor rationis*, if it can never be acquired? The foreclosure of our communion with *ratio* in this life displaces it, as we have seen in Chapter 4, into the afterlife. In this way *ratio* remains an acquirable, but ever-removed goal. It remains always just out of reach. We are *proficientes*, forever striving as a present participle, never quite reaching the goal nor the finite verb form. So it is that our failure to acquire *ratio* always leaves us still desiring it: and it is this desire, this *amor*, which Stoicism implants as the foundation for its ethics. Thus this desire for *ratio* motivates and defines the Stoic.

Finally, then, it is no surprise that philosophy is presented in the guise of a sexy woman. As the *proficiens*’ desired love-object, she takes on the appearance of the traditional love-object.

Nec recuso quominus singula membra, dummodo in ipso homine, consideres: non est formonsa cuius crus laudatur aut brachium, sed illa cuius universa facies admirationem partibus singulis abstulit. (33.5)

[I won’t stop you from admiring each body part, so long as you admire the body as a whole: [wisdom] is not a beautiful woman whose legs or arms you appreciate, but one whose entire figure steals your gaze away from the individual parts.]

The distinction is between parts and the whole: legs, arms v. the entire body. Close-ups are OK, but Seneca insists that we turn to the centerfold. Only there may we appreciate the beauty of the whole (*illa cuius universa facies*). The whole, then, is privileged over the parts.

And again at Ep. 89:

Utinam quidem quemadmodum universa mundi facies in conspectum venit, ita philosophia tota nobis posset occurrere, simillimum mundo spectaculum! Profecto enim omnes mortales in admirationem sui raperet, relictis iis quae nunc magna magnorum ignorantia credimus. Sed quia contingere hoc non potest, est sic nobis aspicienda quemadmodum mundi secreta cernuntur. (89.1)

[The entire appearance of the world has come into view. If only the whole of philosophy were able to present herself to us in the same way, a sight just like the world itself! For she would immediately capture all]
mortals in appreciation for her, and we would abandon those things we now consider great out of ignorance. But since this cannot happen, we must gaze upon her just like those who examine isolated parts of the world.

We were instructed in Ep. 33 to look at the whole. But now, in Ep. 89 we find that the whole will not be revealed to us. The vocabulary is the same: universa facies. In Ep. 33, it was to be sought; now in Ep. 89 it is hidden. But again the whole is praised. Were we to see it, it would seize the admiration of all and would reveal truly great things to us. Since we are prevented from such a sight—indeed, such touching (contingere hoc non potest)—we must content ourselves with the bits we can see. Once again, an earlier letter implants an injunction in the reader which later proves to be impossible to achieve. In this way we are again left in want, desiring to see the whole of philosophy.

What, moreover, is the whole of philosophy? What is certain is that the Letters as philosophy is far from the whole corpus. Thus the Letters mirror our inability to grasp the whole of philosophy. The acquisition of this goal cannot, as it turns out, be accomplished by reading through the Letters. Rather, the fulfillment of this goal lies ever beyond, beyond the Letters, beyond our lifetime, ever deferred.

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23 Cf. Balzac’s perspicacious assessment of Seneca’s writing style: “Son Discours n’est pas un corps entier: c’est un corps en pieces; ce sont des membres couppez;...” (“De Montaigne et de ses écrits,” quoted at Williamson (1951) 146). Maurach (1970) 17 repeats this theme, though seemingly unaware of Balzac. However he cites Grimal, who may very well have been aware of Balzac’s statement. In any case the motif may be traced back to Seneca himself, as we have seen in Chapter 2.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this study I made the claim that Seneca is not all that different from the Marquis de Sade. Namely, that in both authors the relationship between reason and eroticism are not as simple and clear-cut as they first appear. From Seneca, then, we expect the doctrinal Stoic stance on erotics: rejection of the ‘passions’, pleasure and desire. I hope to have shown, however, that Seneca’s treatment of erotics in his philosophy is far more complex. In Chapter 2, The Erotics of the Text, I discussed how literary activity (writing and reading) are cast in Quintilian and Epp. 114, 46, and 59 not only as ethical activity, but as erotic activity. As a result the entire Senecan project of epistolary exchange becomes also an erotic exchange. Every letter opens us up to the dangers of pleasure and desire. We find much the same to be true in Chapter 3, where we investigate Seneca’s version of the medical metaphor. While the metaphor has traditionally functioned as a remedy for the presence of pleasure and desire in our lives, in Seneca it serves only to make us more vulnerable to experiencing erotics. Dr. Seneca, Doctor of Philosophy both gets ill himself and takes sadistic pleasure in curing his patients. Thus this metaphor too exposes us to the very eroticism we had sought to avoid. In both cases the transference of philosophy to another medium—another corpus—opens it up to the infiltration of pleasure and desire. Our inability to control these corpora, literary and bodily, permits the intrusion of erotics into these discourses. It follows, then, that in death—devoid of either of these corpora—we may be free from these desires. But
paradoxically, as a state devoid of eroticism, death itself becomes desired.¹ Seneca’s descriptions of the afterlife evoke a perfect union with reason, knowledge, philosophy. In this way death becomes envisioned as the site of ideal philosophical activity, where the philo-sopher consummates his union with *sophia* unimpeded by language or bodies. Seneca’s philosophy, then, inculcates a desire for this union with philosophy whilst rejecting other erotic relations. Furthermore, as this desire for union with reason / philosophy defines the Stoic *proficiens*, not only is philosophy the subject of his desire (to use Butler’s phraseology), but he also makes himself subject to this desire, and he makes himself a subject by this desire.

This study has sought to trace the course of this love-affair. In doing so the earlier chapters underscore Seneca’s unique position as intermediary / matchmaker. The eroticism of the earlier chapters is present in our / Lucilius’ relations with Seneca (i.e. not philosophy herself). The writer / reader relationship is eroticized; the doctor / patient relationship is eroticized. The latter chapters, however, focus on the final object of the desire, philosophy herself. Writer Seneca and Dr. Seneca, as it turns out, function as a point of transference: literary personae which aids our progression towards philosophy. The project of the *Letters* involve another sort of *translatio*. While Ep. 108 reiterates that the goal of the *Epistulae Morales* is to translate *epistulae*, words, to *morales*, ethical deeds, we may now recognize that another act of translation functions in the opposite direction: to translate our corporeal desires to aethereal desires. And in this act of translation the figure of Seneca is key.

¹ A few words on the desire for death: one cannot speak these days of a desire for death without evoking the spectre of Freud. Seneca’s version does seem to have something in common with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: in both authors the immediate gratification of pleasure is rejected in favor of a death-like, destructive force. But Freud’s thought-pattern and argumentation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* are unclear; it has often been remarked that the concept of the death drive arrives out of nowhere. As a result there is not a great deal that I can definitively state about the formulation of the desire for death in Seneca vis à vis Freud. Seneca at least (as I will assert momentarily) may be viewed as part of a philosophical tradition which posits death as the locus for the fulfillment of the philosophical goal.
This act of translation from corporeal desire to aethereal desire should not seem unfamiliar. It is, in essence, another version of Diotima’s ladder from Plato’s *Symposium*: the substitution of successively more philosophically abstract objects of desire. But again we must recognize that Seneca’s unique contribution to this formulation is that he himself takes the position of an intermediate object of desire. But in the *Symposium*, too, the final object of desire is ultimately all but unattainable. It may seem, then, that such desire is futile if the object is unattainable. And yet upon reflection we may appreciate that this structure—desire for an ultimately unattainable goal—characterizes the work of philosophy. The etymology gives it away: the lover of wisdom cannot ever acquire wisdom. Wisdom is not an object of limited size and scope which can be mastered or held. But without this impossible desire the philosopher is no philosopher. Like the Stoic *proficiens*, the philosopher is defined—in more than an etymological sense—by his desire.

Robert Pippin’s study on Nietzsche, nihilism, and desire comes to much the same conclusion from a markedly different angle.\(^2\) Nietzsche’s nihilism, Pippin contends, is not a failure of knowledge or of belief, but of desire. The erotic imagery in Nietzsche points towards a fundamental desire necessary for philosophical activity. Without such desire nihilism ensues. But Nietzsche’s desire, like the Platonist’s and the Stoic’s, cannot be fulfilled. Thus impossible desire defines the Nietzschean philosopher as well. Pippin remarks that this formulation of impossible desire is not so unusual in the history of western literature:

Yet what Nietzsche is getting at is all phenomenologically quite familiar, as familiar as the *essential* ambiguity of the great “quest” objects of modern literature and the irony of those quests, those hopes for resolution and completion and redemption: Quixote’s adventure and windmills, Tennyson’s Holy Grail, Emma Bovary’s desperate

\(^2\) Pippin (2005).
These sorts of “quests” are therefore not limited to the domain of literary characters, but they also form the fabric of philosophical activity.

We may now appreciate that this philosophical structure which we have observed in Seneca—the philosopher / proficiens / lover in pursuit of philosophy / sagehood / beloved—may also be observed throughout much of the tradition of Western philosophy. It may in closing be useful to touch upon some of the ramifications of such a structure.

There is, first of all, the issue of futility: if philosophers are destined—indeed, prefigured—never to acquire their goal, what is the purpose of philosophy? More cynically still: if the goal of wisdom is never to be defined and never to be acquired, is it a mere construct to legitimize the practice of philosophy? Seneca and his fellow Stoics would reply that no, it is not the acquisition of the goal that matters so much as the journey. Thus philosophy lies in the process of thinking, and behaving, so as to acquire the goal. And it is this journey which is in fact the goal, and the desire for wisdom an inducement towards it. This desirous subject, then, is necessary for warding off nihilism.

Second, there is the issue of gender: philosophy is insistently identified as woman; the philosopher, as man. Philosophical argumentation, moreover, has also traditionally been masculine. The work of philosophy is structured as both masculine and heterosexual. This poses a problem for: 1) the woman philosopher; 2) those for whom woman is not the object of desire. If both the philosopher and philosophical

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3 Pippin (2005) 180-181; italics are Pippin’s.

4 There seems, interestingly, to be some amount of what is termed “homosocial” behavior among men in the work of philosophy. But note that the heterosexual structure of the philosopher / philosophy relationship and the homosocial behavior among philosophers are not mutually exclusive.
language are figured as masculine, the woman philosopher is barred from the practice of philosophy. Feminist philosophy has pursued this line of thought.\(^5\) As for woman as love-object: does this gendering of philosophy affect the desire of the philosopher for philosophy? That is—to combine the first and second objections—does the work of philosophy require the philosopher to be a straight man?\(^6\) But can this structure of philosophy be dismantled without falling into nihilism? Or does the restructuring of the object of desire alter the philosopher's desire such that philosophical activity is no longer possible?

Perhaps crotchety old man Seneca, of all people, suggests that such is possible. While the ultimate goal, philosophy, is cast as a woman, Seneca also casts himself as an intermediary love-object. He implies thus that anything, even the wrinkled old man, may become the love-object. Moreover, Seneca emphatically rejects dialectic as a mode of philosophical activity, and employs literary figures such as metaphor (effeminate trope that it is), as I hope to have demonstrated in this study. I do not mean to imply that Seneca is a pioneering feminist philosopher. But I do hope to suggest that from Seneca we may begin to consider how we might find ways to do philosophy differently.

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\(^{5}\) In the realm of ancient philosophy, a considerable amount of attention has been lavished on the figure of Diotima.

\(^{6}\) This is not a question about one's personal life. Rather, it is a question about identification of a persona qua philosopher, not qua sexuality. Thus a straight woman or a gay man might also be the traditional philosopher, provided (s)he identifies as a straight man qua philosopher.
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