

## Ideal Audiences in Seneca's Letters

In his *Moral Letters*, Seneca often considers the experience of readers and writers, instances which create what Schafer 2011 describes as “the *Letters*’ self-conscious literarity” (36). Suggesting that Seneca envisions multiple audiences while writing, I will point specifically to his descriptions of potentially supportive and hostile readers, focusing most closely on *Eps.* 46, 84, 100, and 114, all of which contain discussions of reading and writing. Read together, these letters, which I call “critical,” outline Seneca’s critical approach to literature and how he expects to be read. By clarifying the relationship between composition and the potential audiences that Seneca imagines for his letters, I will explore the close connection between Seneca’s understanding of the eventual outcome of his writing and his own ability to compensate for the quality and capacity of his audience.

The ideal audience for Seneca’s writing is someone with the ability to resist common sentiment and think critically about style and appropriate subject matter. In *Ep.* 114, Seneca describes indiscriminate consumers of fashion and food, who are only slightly better than the “dirty throng,” “*corona sordidior*” in that they go along with the common preference rather than indulge actually wicked interests (114.11-12). The issue then, is not the class of the reader, but rather whether that person is able to distinguish themselves from their peers and think in an individual manner about the material being presented to them. This distinction between kinds of readers implies that Seneca’s letter-reading audience, even if it comprises almost exclusively wealthy and educated consumers, still contains individuals with varying levels of capacity or willingness to understand his arguments.

In *Ep.* 84, Seneca uses the idea of bees as consumers and producers to discuss how reading and writing are closely connected, and to instill in his audience a sense of direction when

reading. He insists that his audience read and write in the same specific way that he describes bees consume and produce (*Ep.* 84.3-6). The ideal reader commits himself to an unending cycle of consumption, evaluation, digestion, and then renewed production. Graber 2014 presents the discerning bees as a metaphor for self-development and the process of creating a cohesive self that can be expressed through an author's writings (291-2). While I agree that Graber's reading of Seneca's letters is accurate, I argue that the success of Seneca's works is as much dependent on his audience's ability to follow this strategy of reading and writing as it is on Seneca's own self-actualization.

As much as Seneca seems to use bees to advocate for careful and attentive reading and writing, we can also see lurking in the bee metaphor a kind of community that reflects Seneca's attention to consumption by the less critical masses. *Ep.* 7 further exaggerates the dangers of an indiscriminate, untrained audience. In the letter Seneca connects the crowd at a spectacle to the idea of immoral consumption. It is not actually the events of the arena that Seneca condemns, but rather how they call for untrained men to murder each other (Cagniard 2000, 612). However, while Cagniard argues that Seneca makes the audience into additional victims of this spectacle, their active participation and incitement is impossible to ignore. The *turba* become *spectatores* who do not just passively spread their own vices into the souls of the vulnerable but also play an active role in the deaths of the arena (7.3-5). Seneca presents the violence of the games as a preference of the audience, not as a system that is naturally a part of the principate. By showing how the audience calls for more and more death and destruction, Seneca forces his readers to consider what the arena would look like should the quality of the audience change.

I argue that this kind of disdain for public preference demonstrates Seneca's understanding of the power of the indiscriminate audience. Regardless of the kinds of work

Seneca publishes, there is a danger that either the subject matter or the format of the work may not match the preferences of his wider audience. Even if Seneca tried to create writing directed specifically toward indiscriminate consumers, the potential for misunderstanding or abuse of the work would still remain. The solution, then, is inside the letters themselves. If Seneca can create a disdain for the common public preference for morally degrading material, and advocate for a countercultural, individualistic kind of consumption that favors his style and philosophical ideals, then he ensures his own success.

#### Works Cited

- Cagniard, Pierre (2000). "The Philosopher and the Gladiator." *The Classical World*, 93(6), 607–618.
- Graber, Margaret (2014). "Honeybee Reading and Self-Scripting: Epistulae Morales 84" in *Seneca Philosophus*, edited by Jula Wildberger, and Marcia L. Colish, De Gruyter, Inc., 2014. 264-296.
- Schafer, J. (2011). "Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* as Dramatized Education." *Classical Philology*, 106(1), 32–52.