

The Comic in the Cosmic: The Staging of Hostius Quadra in Seneca's Natural Questions

This paper considers the function of the Hostius Quadra episode within the context of Book 1 of Seneca's Natural Questions. In the Natural Questions, Seneca investigates various natural phenomena to encourage the reader to elevate her gaze above the terrestrial realm to the world of the divine, thus attaining a "cosmic viewpoint" (Williams 2012). With regards to theme and style, the Quadra episode stands out from the rest of the book. In the midst of a technical discussion of coronae, meteors, rainbows, and iridescent avian feathers, what place is there for a long side-story about a man who enjoys watching lewd sexual acts magnified and multiplied in a room of mirrors? This puzzle has drawn the attention of many scholars. David Leitão suggests that Quadra's grotesque display provides a counter-model for a means to transcendence, in which man so enlarges himself through "bodily reconfiguration and excess" that he becomes a sort of perverse god (1998: 160). Gareth Williams points out that Quadra is an ironized version of the sapiens. Hostius is a "mis-reflection" of the true philosopher: the former looks at images in a chamber of mirrors, while the latter looks at phenomena in the chamber of the cosmos (Williams 2012).

In this paper, I offer another model of interpretation. I argue that Seneca creates a stage within the text of Book 1 and puts on a comic display. Hostius is a dangerous and alluring figure who threatens to distract the reader inquiring into the cosmos. By relegating Hostius to the scaena, Seneca makes his obscaena actions less damaging. Just as Greek and Roman dramatists permitted the impermissible in the bounds of drama, so also Seneca puts the nefas onstage, and by doing so makes it less pernicious. Seneca makes Hostius larger-than-life, and thus creates a "mini-comedy" with its own carnivalesque star. Yet by keeping Hostius within the scaena, Seneca precludes his greatest opponent from derailing his cosmic investigation.

Bibliography

Leitão, D.D. 1998. "Senecan Catoptrics and the Passion of Hostius Quadra (Sen. Nat 1)." *MD* 41: 127-60.

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