The Externality of Seneca's *Vitia*: The Progress of Disease and the Possibility of a Cure

Though the utility and importance of Senecan metaphor has long been recognized, its role in Seneca's definition and characterization of vice (*vitia*) remains unexplored. This paper argues that Seneca uses metaphors to show that vice is outside and not inherent to human nature, as a result it can be repulsed, fought, avoided, and cured. The metaphors examined are critical to Seneca's therapeutic discourse and its usefulness for teaching.

The importance of places, one's outside environs, is stressed in a few letters (e.g. Ep. 28.6, 51.4) as is the clear indication that physical health represents mental/moral health in the quest of the *proficiens* for places that encourage soundness. Furthermore, the nature of moral disease itself is likened to bodily illnesses as fever and gout (Ep. 53.6) which though they may escape detection, erupt and rage in the open, for which moral disease philosophy serves as if prescriptions of useful drugs (Ep. 8.2). But these vices, being for Seneca the worst of all diseases, can hide in a pretended recovery (Ep. 56.10).

Ancillary metaphors also underscore Seneca's externalization of vice. One such image is stealth and thievery (e.g. Ep. 51.13). Whether in the midst of a crowd (Ep. 7) or in quiet conversation (Ep. 89.9) or as he says, in passing, concerning the role of luxury in converting kingdoms to tyrannies (Ep. 90.6), it comes from without as a creeping and furtive thief.

Slavery and the personification of the vices as persons wishing to rule over those enslaved also appear in service to Seneca's goal. Slavery to the divine, as he says, is voluntary (at best, if at all): "I do not obey god, but agree with him, and follow him freely, not because I am constrained" (Ep. 96.2). It is far less sufferable that men

willingly choose to be enslaved to vice as to their fellow men (Ep. 47.17), as he says, “no bondage is more shameful than that which is willing.” In like fashion the vices themselves are subject to vice, and quarrel with and vex one another in the desire to dominate the souls of men (see especially Ep. 56.5,9-10; 51.8), ambition, luxury, desire, fear, and the like.

In brief, Seneca externalizes vice and places it outside of his conception of man’s nature. Like disease it invades; as a thief it creeps upon and steals what is not its own; like slavery it binds to a master outside of oneself. Since it is external and not properly part and parcel of the soul, it can be removed, and the soul cured. Seneca’s alternating moments of optimism and pessimism in many letters thus can be explained based upon the disease’s severity in an individual, and upon his progress toward cure, with his optimism decidedly tipping the scales.

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