

Learning to Write, Learning to Live: *chirographum* in Seneca *Ep.* 94

Coming toward the end of Seneca's *Epistulae Morales (EM)* are the paired *Epp.* 94 & 95, the longest letters in the collection, which offer different answers to the same question: what is sufficient for an education in (Stoic) philosophy? While the latter letter approaches the question by arguing for the necessity of learning the deeper doctrinal truths over and above practical wisdom, Seneca devotes *Ep.* 94 to pushing back against a former scholarch of his own school, Ariston, to argue that doctrines alone are not sufficient to help people learn philosophy and thus to become happy and virtuous—precepts must be added in to help people get to the deeper truths of Stoicism. Seneca caps off his argument for the necessity of precepts with the following example:

*pueri ad praescriptum discunt; digiti illorum tenentur et aliena manu per litterarum simulacra ducuntur, deinde imitari iubentur proposita et ad illa reformare chirographum: sic animus noster, dum eruditur ad praescriptum, iuvatur (Ep. 94.51)*

The example of boys being taught to write maps well onto the idea that more morally immature individuals need a guide to help them practice the fundamentals before they are able to emerge as moral agents in their own right, and the remainder of the letter takes up the question of who the proper trainers for our souls should be.

In this particular analogy, Seneca uses a Greek loan word, *chirographum*, to illustrate the product of the education of young boys likened to the education of individuals in developing virtue. As Henderson (2009) and Inwood (2005) point out, Seneca's philosophizing is heavily grounded in the Latin language, as opposed to the Greek of the Old Stoa (and of philosophy

more generally), so the inclusion of this Greek term without any explanation is marked, particularly compared to the use of τὸ ὄν in *Ep.* 58 and ἀνυπαρξία in *Ep.* 87 as Seneca laments the limits of Latin terminology. The use of this Greek word is also more marked given the letter in which it appears, for as Schafer (2009) demonstrates, though late in the collection these two letters illustrate the principles that guide Seneca's own pedagogical method in educating Lucilius and his wider audience for moral progress. As such, Seneca's own specifically Latin philosophical method is based around the way that boys are trained in developing their *chirographum*.

In this paper, I argue that Seneca deploys the metaphor of developing one's *chirographum* in order to blend Greek philosophy with elite Roman male business practice, both as a way to incentivize readers like the addressee Lucilius to embrace Stoic teaching but also as a further development of Stoic philosophy toward a more affective and interpersonal dimension, as developed elsewhere by Reydams-Schils (2005). Given Seneca's philosophical Latinity, it is perhaps unsurprising that *chirographum* appears only once more in Seneca's entire corpus at *De Ben.* 2.23 to discuss people who are afraid to give or receive in secret, which points toward the more technical use of *chirographum* in Roman law as proof of a particular transaction. Seneca's father also provides, with his lone use at *Contr.* 6.1, an opposite example, where the *chirographum* is used to assert the personal relationship and responsibility between a father and sons. In conjunction with similar legal metaphors collected by Armisen-Marchetti (1989) and interpreted by Edwards (2009) from across the *EM*, I demonstrate how the training of the *chirographum* is applied from the very beginning of the collection, as *Ep.* 1.1's initial command *vindica te tibi* draws on legal formulations for asserting free status and property rights (OED 1 & 2) for which the *chirographum* would be decisive proof. Further, given the importance of

*imitatio* in Seneca's treatment of writing in *Ep.* 84, as discussed by Setaioli (2000), I suggest the *chirographum* condenses the literary and philosophical projects of Seneca together while emphasizing the interpersonal nature of developing moral freedom. Seneca's own writing serves as the *praescriptum* for his Roman audience to imitate as he applies his own hand(writing) for them to develop the *chirographum* which allows them to lay claim to themselves as citizens, philosophers, and writers.

### Selected Works Cited

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