

Seneca's Future Readers

In this paper I argue that Seneca imagines future readers, perhaps even readers who exist after Rome's age of dominance, as an important group to educate. Seneca writes that a philosopher can have a greater impact on history because he can continue to shape events long after his lifetime. Seneca recognizes then that the largest audience he has the greatest chance of educating has not yet been born. Investigating Seneca's focus on the future allows us not only to see how expansive Seneca's view of his audiences was but also to understand how he sought to break the bounds not only of his own life (and questions about it), but of his contemporaries too (contra Roller (2001) and Star (2004)). We should see not only his addressees and his fellow Romans of the Claudian/Neronian period behind his philosophical writings but later, unknown readers too.

Throughout his philosophical corpus Seneca frequently draws attention to the great span of human history and the far greater span of cosmic history (eg . *NQ* 1 pref. 11 and *Dial.* 6.21.1-2). One reason for these reminders about two different temporal perspectives is to push readers out of their individual moments and daily mindsets to think differently about the values they hold and choices they make in their lives (Williams (2012)). But they also show a recognition of the fact that most of time does not include and will not include Seneca, his addressee, and his contemporary Romans. I will argue that through references to the expanse of time beyond any human lifetime, Seneca is also attempting to incorporate future readers into his audience and educate them. To support this point, I will discuss how we can read Seneca's references to past philosophers as a guide to the future. If Socrates, Zeno, Aristotle, and Carneades are available as mentors for Seneca and his readers (*Dial.* 8.6.4-5 and *Dial.* 10.14.1-2 with Hine (2006)), then Seneca himself will be available to interested readers in the centuries after his death too – a point

he makes explicitly at *Ep.* 21.3-5. While some might dismiss this as just another boastful author staking a claim to literary immortality, we should take it more seriously as offering insight into Seneca's didactic aims. For, as I will argue next, adopting a dead philosopher or in Seneca's terms inheriting one, does not require wholesale acceptance of his ideas. Seneca explicitly states in the *Natural Questions* that ideas are refined over time (*NQ* 6.5.2-3). He understands that the philosophers of any age are limited by the knowledge and cultures within which they work. Seneca therefore is really imagining a long-running accumulation and refinement of knowledge, which would include disposing of contradictory or vicious ideas over time. Through an examination of a passage on the purpose of punishment (*Dial* 3.19.7), I will conclude with some reflections on how Seneca shows that it is always future audiences towards whom one's lessons are directed.

Bibliography

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