

Senex in scholas: Twisting a Ciceronian Scenario in Seneca's Controversiae

This paper explores Seneca's evocation in the *Controversiae* of a peculiarly Ciceronian scenario: the older man's instruction of younger adult men in oratory in an informal "school". The model functions as an idealized old-age project in Cicero (cf. Cokayne 2007), but becomes a foil to Seneca's *senex in scholas*, who takes a very different position in the "school" and fails to maintain authority and pleasure as the *Controversiae*'s project plays out.

The Ciceronian scenario in question is introduced in the first preface of the *Controversiae*, as Seneca remarks that he arrived in Rome just too late to hear Cicero declaim "in that little hall in which he says two big boys (*grandes praetextatos*) declaimed with him" (*Con.* 1.pr.11). Suetonius identifies the two grown-ups in boys' *togae praetextae* as Hirtius and Pansa and dates this habitual declamation to Cicero's oldish age (*senior*) (Suet. *Rhet.* 1.3). Cicero writes similarly in 46 BCE about instructing Hirtius and Dolabella in declamation, calling them his *discipuli dicendi* (*Cic. Fam.* 9.16.7). All three of Cicero's named "students" would have been in their mid-to-late thirties at the time, and Cicero in his early sixties, in a premature retirement brought on by the dictatorship of Caesar. Cicero also describes the production of the *Tusculan Disputations* in the same time period at a school of sorts he set up for friends where he attempted to join rhetoric and philosophy, calling this activity "the *declamatio* of his old age" (*Tusc.* 1.7). The same arrangement is discussed in another letter of 46 and explicitly linked to Cicero's effective exile from the city (*Fam.* 19.18.1). We thus see Cicero consistently using the model of declamatory education as an antidote to the inactivity forced upon him by the political climate and by aging, a re-constitution in a light-hearted mode of his authority: Cicero is quite clearly the master of his "school". A very similar scenario is promoted by Cicero's Cato in *de Senectute* 28-

29 and marked as both an appropriate and a pleasurable project for the old man, keeping him focused on the future through the prospective careers of his "students".

In some senses, Seneca's text fits this scenario: he is equipping his sons for public life by giving them rhetorical models (cf. Bloomer 1997: 115-20), and the text gestures regularly towards a face-to-face scenario. Much more often, however, Seneca's project makes restoration and recovery of a better past the dominant themes. He is ambivalent about whether what he is doing is useful to his sons but finds *beneficium* to himself in a nostalgic reunion with his long-deceased friend Latro (*Con.* 1.pr.13). The speaker is doggedly focused on the memory of events and people of his own youth, rather than on the futures of the young men with whom he is nominally in conversation. This departure from the Ciceronian scenario is particularly focused by Seneca's game agreement to go back to school: *mittatur senex in scholas* ("Let an old man be sent into to school" *Con.* 1.pr.4). The quip places Seneca anomalously and awkwardly as a student in the *scholae* of his text, not a master *à la* Cicero (cf. Berti 2007, 36-37, though with a more positive spin). The Seneca of the text grows increasingly disconsolate as he brings his audience and the reader up to his present day and in the end finds neither pleasure nor an affirmation of his own virtue and authority in the project he has undertaken (*Con.* 10.pr.1).

The very success of Seneca's text in bridging the gap of years and knowledge between his sons and himself contributes to its vivid failure as an assertion of the old man's present position as an active, authoritative, *bonus vir* (pace Gunderson 2003). The image of the softened, dulled, unmanned *senex* introduced in the first preface re-emerges in the last preface as the pattern of decadence and decline that is the overarching premise of the text reasserts its power over Seneca's body and mind. By evoking and engaging alternative models of masculine old age through the Ciceronian scenario of an "old man in the schools," Seneca allows his reader to

critique his own project and to recognize the connection between his insistence on rhetorical decadence and his pessimistic take on aging.

Bibliography

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