

## SENECA AND FELICIO: IMAGERY AND PURPOSE

### INTRODUCTION

Seneca's twelfth *Moral Epistle* is a reflection on old age. He begins with a prooemium in which he narrates a visit to one of his estates near Rome, where an encounter with various things familiar from his youth, but now grown old, is a potent reminder of his own incipient decrepitude:

Quocumque me uerti, argumenta senectutis meae uideo. Veneram in suburbanum meum et querebar de impensis aedificii dilabentis. Ait uilicus mihi non esse neglegentiae suae uitium, omnia se facere, sed uillam ueterem esse. Haec uilla inter manus meas creuit: quid mihi futurum est, si tam putria sunt aetatis meae saxa? Iratus illi proximam occasionem stomachandi arripio. (2) 'Apparet' inquam 'has platanos neglegi: nullas habent frondes. Quam nodosi sunt et retorridi rami, quam tristes et squalidi trunci! Hoc non accideret si quis has circumfoderet, si inrigaret.' Iurat per genium meum se omnia facere, in nulla re cessare curam suam, sed illas uetulas esse. Quod intra nos sit, ego illas posueram, ego illarum primum uideram folium. (3) Conuersus ad ianuam 'quis est iste?' inquam 'iste decrepitus et merito ad ostium admotus? Foras enim spectat. Unde istunc nactus es? Quid te delectauit alienum mortuum tollere?' At ille 'non cognoscis me?' inquit: 'ego sum Felicio, cui solebas sigillaria adferre; ego sum Philositi uilici filius, deliciolum tuum'. 'Perfecte' inquam 'iste delirat: pupulus, etiam delicium meum factus est? Prorsus potest fieri: dentes illi cum maxime cadunt'.

Wherever I turn, I see proofs of my old age. I had come to my estate outside Rome and was complaining about the cost of repairing a dilapidated building. My manager told me that it wasn't the fault of negligence on his part, he was doing all he could, but the villa was old. This villa grew up under my hands: what will become of me, if stones the same age as I am are in such a state of decay? Angry at him, I seized the first opportunity to let off steam: 'These plane trees are clearly being neglected: they don't have any leaves. How knotted and dried up are their branches, how miserable and rough are their trunks! This wouldn't happen if someone dug trenches around them and watered them.' He swears by my guardian spirit that he is doing everything, has given them all his care in every respect, but they are old. Between you and me, I had planted them, I had seen their first leaf. Turning to the door, I said: 'Who is he, that decrepit creature? He deserves to have been put in charge of the door, because he's facing out of doors. Where did you get him from? What possessed you to take up someone else's corpse?' But he [the old fellow] said: 'Don't you recognise me? I am Felicio: you used to give me little presents at the Saturnalia; I'm the son of your manager Philositus, your little pet'. I said: 'He's completely raving: has he become a little boy again, my pet slave even? But certainly it *is* possible: even now his teeth are falling out'.

The pathetic image of the elderly slave Felicio, now useful for nothing but door-keeping and as the butt of seemingly callous jokes, has frequently been discussed in isolation by historians of Roman slavery.<sup>1</sup> But the Felicio episode can only be fully appreciated in its context, that is, as part of an integrated narrative of a visit by Seneca to his estate. To illustrate the point that the estate and its contents, like Seneca,

<sup>1</sup> E.g. T. Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (London, 1981), 129; H. Parker, 'Crucially funny or Tranio on the couch: the *seruus callidus* and jokes about torture', *TAPA* 119 (1989), 233–46, at 242; K. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge, 1994), 139; C. Laes, 'Desperately different? *Delicia* children in the Roman household', in D. Balch and C. Osiek (edd.), *Early Christian Families in Context* (Michigan, 2003), 298–324, at 303; cf. also A. Setaioli, 'Seneca, lo schiavo Felicione e un iscrizione di Velia', *Prometheus* 24 (1998), 149–51.

have grown old, three examples are cited, with a progression from the inanimate villa, to the living but non-human plane trees, to the human slave Felicio.<sup>2</sup> In a typically Senecan use of imagery, all three entities are a metaphor for senescence in general, and, in particular, the aged condition of Seneca himself.<sup>3</sup> At the opening of the Epistle, Seneca berates his *uilicus* for the apparently neglected state of his villa and plantation. But on being told that this is due to old age, his recollection of building the villa and personally planting the trees brings home to him vividly how old he himself must be.<sup>4</sup> Then comes the encounter with the slave. Again, the *uilicus* is criticized – this time for buying someone else's old and unwanted *seruus*.<sup>5</sup> This slave intervenes, asking his owner to recognize him as the child who was taken up as a pet (*delicium*) by Seneca at the time when he was establishing his estate, Felicio being the son of the then *uilicus*, Philositus.<sup>6</sup> The recognition is the final element, in addition to the villa and the plane trees, associated with the early years of the estate: all three contribute to Seneca's disquieting realization that he must be really getting on if things that he can remember from their earliest days are now old.

In what follows, we will undertake a more thorough-going discussion of the proemium to *Epistle* 12 than has hitherto been attempted even by scholars such as Henderson<sup>7</sup> who have engaged with the literary subtleties of the text. First, we will subject the passage to a detailed analysis in order to demonstrate how possibly fictional details are elegantly woven together by Seneca into an artistic entity. Second, we will examine the passage in the wider context of both the twelfth Epistle and the Letters as a whole, demonstrating how it anticipates some broader patterns relating to Seneca's protreptic techniques and themes in the work.

#### LITERARY ARTIFICE IN 12.1–3

The reading of *Epistle* 12.1–3 which is undertaken below attempts to show that Seneca's account of the visit to his farm is to a large extent a literary construct. Since this might appear to be labouring the obvious, it is vital to note that a significant number of scholars, commenting particularly on Seneca's indifference towards Felicio's plight, take the episode to be real.<sup>8</sup> Even those who recognize the literary character of the work, such as Christine Richardson-Hay in her recent commentary on Book 1 of the *Epistulae Morales*, seem to assume that the whole episode is based

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. Coleman, 'The artful moralist: a study of Seneca's epistolary style', *CQ* 24 (1974), 276–89, at 283, n. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Coleman (n. 2) notes that it is typical of Seneca to exploit visual details for metaphorical purposes.

<sup>4</sup> *Haec uilla inter manus meas creuit: quid mihi futurum est, si tam putria sunt aetatis meae saxa? ... ego illas (ueltas arbores) posueram, ego illarum primum uideram folium.*

<sup>5</sup> Owners could solve the problem of caring for old, useless slaves by selling them off: see T.G. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History* (Baltimore / London, 2003), 220–1; K. Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome* (London, 2003), 171, nn. 114 and 219.

<sup>6</sup> For adult Romans taking young slaves as *delicia*, cf. W.J. Slater, 'Pueri, turba minuta', *BICS* 21 (1974), 133–40, at 134–5; H.S. Nielsen, 'Delicia in Roman Inscriptions and in the Urban Inscriptions', *ARID* 19 (1990), 79–88, at 81–3; Laes (n. 1), 300–4. Many scholars (e.g. all cited in n. 1 above except Setaioli; C.D.N. Costa [ed.], *Seneca: 17 Letters* [Warminster, 1988], ad loc. and W.C. Summers [ed.], *Select Letters of Seneca* [London, 1960], ad loc.) have incorrectly assumed that Felicio was Seneca's slave playmate as a child, which would make them contemporaries.

<sup>7</sup> J. Henderson, *Morals and Villas in Seneca's Letters: Places to Dwell* (Cambridge, 2004), 19–27.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. the scholars listed in n. 1 above.

on an incident which really took place and which has been exploited by Seneca as a vehicle to make a moral point.<sup>9</sup> Others, conversely, have assumed that the account is a fiction, but without attempting to substantiate this position.<sup>10</sup> Given this, and the further fact that discussions of 'fictionality' in the Epistles typically focus on the broader issue of whether or not the Letters represent a real correspondence,<sup>11</sup> rather than on possibly fictional elements within the individual epistle, it seems worthwhile to subject sections 1–3 of *Epistle* 12 to a close analysis which will show how a number of ostensibly autobiographical elements are in fact so artfully contrived, so anchored in literary tradition, that it is legitimate to question whether there is any more than a soft kernel of fact at the heart of the whole episode.

In arguing this, it is not our intention to suggest that the character of Felicio is a total fiction, or to deny that Seneca owned and spent time at such an estate as he describes in the Epistle: land owners regularly visited their properties to inspect the work of the *uilicus* for possible shortcomings, as Seneca represents himself doing here.<sup>12</sup> This said, there are many elements in the episode which when examined closely may be shown to be intensely literary, and it is our contention that only an appreciation of this will enable us to appreciate fully Seneca's artistry in constructing his narrative.

To begin with an obvious point, Seneca's encountering on the farm of *three* exempla of old age (the villa, the plane trees, the elderly Felicio) is too convenient for comfort, inviting the suspicion that at least one of the incidents was invented for the sake of completing a rhetorical triad.<sup>13</sup>

Next, let us consider the description of the villa buildings and the plane trees. The essential reality of this incident has been taken for granted, yet there is something seriously wrong with the *uilicus*' explanation that their condition is unavoidable due to their extreme age. The dramatic date of the letter is A.D. 63–4, when Seneca was in his sixties.<sup>14</sup> But the villa cannot be as old as this, despite the description of the stones as 'of my age' (*aetatis meae*), since Seneca says that he built the villa himself (*haec uilla inter manus meas creuit*).<sup>15</sup> If we postulate that Seneca acquired the property in his mid to late teens at the earliest,<sup>16</sup> this would make the house about fifty years old.

<sup>9</sup> C. Richardson-Hay, *First Lessons. Book 1 of Seneca's Epistulae Morales: A Commentary* (Bern, 2006), 29, 351. Henderson (n. 7) also seems to assume, if we understand him correctly, that the whole episode is based on a real incident, while subserving a larger philosophical purpose.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. M.T. Griffin, *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford, 1992), 277 '(Felicio and other) slaves (named) must have existed, but did the scenes described really take place?'

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. Wilson, 'Seneca's Epistles to Lucilius: a revaluation', *Ramus* 16 (1987), 102–21, at 119, n. 3 and the bibliography there cited; Richardson-Hay (n. 9), 33–4 and n. 55 with further bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> Agricultural writers advise landlords to undertake regular inspections of their estates in person, in order to check on the efficiency of the *uilicus*: cf. Cato, *Agr.* 2.2–4; Columella 1.7.5, 8.20; J. Carlsen, *Vilici and Roman Estate Managers until AD 284* (Rome, 1995), 85–92.

<sup>13</sup> On Seneca's liking for grouping *exempla* in threes, see R.G. Mayer, 'Roman historical exempla in Seneca', in *Sénèque et la prose latine* (Fondation Hardt Entretiens 36, Geneva, 1991), 141–76 at 155–6.

<sup>14</sup> Seneca was born between 4 and 1 B.C.: cf. M. Griffin, 'The Elder Seneca and Spain', *JRS* 62 (1972), 1–19, at 7–8, and Griffin (n. 10), 36. This would make him sixty-two at the youngest and sixty-eight at the oldest in A.D. 63–4.

<sup>15</sup> As Nisbet–Hubbard note in commenting on Horace, *Carm.* 2.13.2–3, where it is said that the planter of the accursed tree on Horace's estate <arborem> *sacrilega manu l produxit*, *manus* suggests the bestowal of personal attention.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Griffin (n. 10), 287, who suggests that the acquisition of the *suburbanum* goes back at least to 'the days when Seneca was listening to (i.e. studying philosophy under) Sotion and

Such a villa, built by a wealthy aristocrat, may be assumed to have been solidly constructed, and unless neglected – something that the *uilecus* denies – its stones would hardly be crumbling with age after such a comparatively short period of time.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, even supposing that the *uilecus* was neglectful of his duties, Seneca himself, if he was really the hands-on landlord that he depicts himself as here and elsewhere (cf. *Ep.* 86, *QNat.* 3.7.1), might be expected to have noticed, and dealt with, any deterioration long before the estate got into the condition portrayed in this passage.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, the description of the supposedly superannuated plane trees, with their parched, knotted bark and complete lack of foliage (*nullas habent frondes. Quam nodosi sunt et retorridi rami, quam tristes et squalid trunci!*), strikes a decidedly odd note. Elsewhere, planes are conspicuous for their abundant summer leaves, which made them extremely popular as a shade tree, and they are often associated with the *locus amoenus*, a setting to which the idea of shade is integral.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, they are noteworthy for their longevity, as demonstrated by their place in stories of famously long-lived trees, such as the plane in Delphi purportedly grown there by Agamemnon (Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 4.13.2).<sup>20</sup> Statius' patron Melior had a remarkable specimen, already of a great age (*Silu.* 2.3), while Martial (9.61) describes one planted by Julius Caesar and still luxuriant in Martial's day. Nowadays, planes are commonly planted on city streets, not only because of their abundant shade, but because of their hardiness and resistance to disease and pollution. The plane trees on Seneca's estate, then, should not be in their wretched condition simply through old age. In fact, as portrayed by Seneca, they resemble modern descriptions of American sycamores (a species of plane) affected by the fungal disease anthracnose, which, left untreated, can lead to complete defoliation and a distorted appearance,<sup>21</sup> or by the fungus *Ceratocystis fimbriata platani*, infestation with which results in sparse foliage, small leaves, and elongated sunken cankers on the trunk and larger branches.<sup>22</sup> We must conclude,

Attalus'; Sotion's *floruit* was put by Jerome at A.D. 13 (cf. Griffin [n. 10], 37, n. 9). Since Seneca the Elder died around A.D. 40 (Griffin [n. 10], 33), the property would have legally belonged to him and have been part of the son's *peculium*, but it was common for grown sons still under their father's *potestas* to live separately, e.g. Roscius of Ameria lived in the countryside, on some family farms of which he had the usufruct. See J.F. Gardner, *Family and Familia in Roman Law and Life* (Oxford, 1998), 68–72; K.R. Bradley, *Discovering the Roman Family* (New York/Oxford, 1991), 163–4.

<sup>17</sup> Stone quarried near Rome was soft and buildings which used it did not last more than 80 years, according to Vitruvius (2.7.1–2, 8.8), who also describes structural techniques for ensuring that stone buildings would last as long as possible. For the importance of siting villa buildings to avoid collapse of the structure, cf. Columella 1.5.9–10. So even if Seneca's suburban villa was made of local stone it should not have fallen into a state of decay after 50 years.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Miriam Griffin for this point.

<sup>19</sup> On plane trees being prized for their shade, cf. Plin. *HN* 12.6–12. For shade as a feature of the *locus amoenus*, cf. H.-J. Van Dam (ed.), *P. Papinius Statius Silvae Book II* (Leiden, 1984), 314 (note on *Silu.* 2.3.39–42). See also G. Schönbeck, *Der Locus Amoenus von Homer bis Horaz* (Diss. Heidelberg, 1962), 28–9, 49–56.

<sup>20</sup> The tree at Delphi is also mentioned by Pliny (*HN* 16.238) in a list of famous long-lived trees, which includes some planes. Further examples of long-lived planes from antiquity are cited by V. Hehn, *Kulturpflanzen und Haustiere*<sup>9</sup> (Berlin, 1911), 296. In more recent times, a plane tree has stood in front of Kew Palace in Richmond, near London, since 1762 and is still in fine condition (for a picture see: <http://www.rbgekew.org.uk/plants/trees/oldlions.html>).

<sup>21</sup> S. Nameth and J. Chatfield, 'Anthracnose leaf blight of shade trees', *Ohio State University Extension Fact Sheet: Plant Pathology* (<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/3000/3048.html>); cf. P.D. Manion, *Tree Disease Concepts* (New Jersey, 1981), 140–1.

<sup>22</sup> G. Moorman, 'Canker stain of sycamore and London plane', *Penn State University, Cooperative Extension, Plant Disease Facts* (2006) ([http://www.ppath.cas.psu.edu/extension/plant\\_disease/cankerst.html](http://www.ppath.cas.psu.edu/extension/plant_disease/cankerst.html)).

then, either that the incident of the planes is an invention, just as the famous plane tree under which Plato's *Phaedrus* was set was less a feature of the literal landscape than a construction of Plato's pen (cf. Cic. *De or.* 1.28), or else that the plane trees on Seneca's estate really were in a poor condition but that Seneca, in a piece of fiction, attributes to old age, for purposes of his discussion, symptoms in fact caused by disease.<sup>23</sup>

The doubts just thrown up as to the factual nature of the narrative are reinforced by the extremely literary character of the passage, which is marked by a number of well-established tropes. As symbols of human old age, the villa and trees are to a considerable degree personified. The phrase which Seneca uses of the estate, for instance, *inter manus meas crevit*, probably means 'grew up, was reared, under my care': this is its sense in the only parallel for the phrase which we have found, Apuleius, *Met.* 6.22, where Jupiter declares that he was responsible for the rearing of Cupid.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the conceit that the stones are coeval with Seneca (*aetatis meae saxa* 12.1) likewise seems to personify the villa: the stone quarried to build the villa was of course of indeterminable age, but the age of the stones is equated with the age of the villa, as if the stones, as part of the villa, had their day of birth at the time that the villa was built and a finite life-span, involving growing old and decaying. In particular, it is tempting to read the dilapidated building of the *suburbanum* (*aedificii dilabentis* 12.1) as a symbol of Seneca's own decrepitude, for the image of a collapsing edifice is often associated figuratively with the idea of old age, and it is an image for which Seneca shows a particular fondness, as at 30.2, where an old man's body is compared to a *putre aedificium*.<sup>25</sup> And the symbolic equation of the deteriorating fabric of the building with Seneca's own decaying frame is powerfully reinforced by the epithet selected to describe the former, *putris*: this term and its cognates are often used to characterize the physical disintegration attendant upon old age.<sup>26</sup>

The plane trees of section 2 are similarly replete with symbolic resonances. The idea of trees as images of human life was common in Roman thought.<sup>27</sup> The pattern in such symbolic relationships is that the condition of a tree or trees is somehow mirrored in its human referent. Thus, for example, Pliny records the phenomenon of two myrtles, one known as the 'patrician myrtle' and the other as the 'plebeian', which flourished or withered according to the relative dominance or diminution of the

<sup>23</sup> For *circumfodere* as a remedy for disease, cf. Plin. *HN* 17.247. It must be admitted that in modern times the oriental plane (the species of plane known to the ancient world) is said to be relatively immune to the diseases nowadays affecting the sycamore, but this does not exclude the possibility that in Seneca's day planes suffered from some sort of disease to which they have become immune over two millennia.

<sup>24</sup> Apuleius, *Met.* 6.22 *at tamen modestiae meae memor quodque inter istas meas manus creueris cuncta perficiam* (in the finale to the Cupid and Psyche story, Jupiter says that despite Cupid's insolent behaviour he will arrange his marriage with Psyche because of his clemency and because he raised him).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Ep.* 58.35; *De ira* 2.28.4; *QNat.* 6.10.1–2; Cic. *Sen.* 72 with Powell; Parkin (n. 5), 341, n. 55. Rhiannon Ash additionally draws our attention to Tac. *Hist.* 1.27.2 where Otho claims that *emi sibi praedia uetustate suspecta*, 'is perhaps a metaphor for the state of the empire in the hands of the elderly Galba'. Cf. also (in a slightly different context) the image of life as a house at Sen. *Ep.* 70.16.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. L. C. Watson, *A Commentary on Horace's Epodes* (Oxford, 2003), on *Epod.* 8.7 (where *putrida ... pectora* should refer to elderly mothers, not the Parcae), also the figurative use at Prop. 4.5.69 *atque animam in tegetes putrem exspirare paternas*.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. R. G. M. Nisbet, 'The oak and the axe: symbolism in Seneca, *Hercules Oetaeus* 1618ff.', in S. J. Harrison (ed.), *Collected Papers on Latin Literature* (Oxford, 1995), 202–12, who states at 202 'the life <of trees> moves in human rhythms'.

authority of the Senate or people (*HN* 15.120–1). In a comparable effect, the rotten and barren trees which grow on the quondam site of Troy (Luc. 9.966–9) reflect the decayed glory of the Trojan kingdom.<sup>28</sup> Significantly too, Pliny (*HN* 17.218–19) relates the diseases and death of trees, in terms of both pathology and nomenclature, to those of humans, particularly those of the slave or lower classes. And in the most recent account of tree-symbolism, Philip Hardie has demonstrated that the plane tree of Atedius Melior in Stat. *Silu.* 2.3 figuratively echoes a number of its owner's traits.<sup>29</sup> All this suggests that the aged and deteriorated condition of the plane trees has similarly been contrived as an image of Seneca's own decrepitude, a conclusion which looks the more inviting, since the comparison of trees with people is a conceit for which Seneca shows an especial fondness in his tragic corpus.<sup>30</sup>

To turn now to Seneca's nuanced use of language, the symbolic equation of the aged planes with their elderly owner is surely put beyond doubt by his choice of adjectives to characterize the former: for *nodosus*, *retorridus*, *tristis*, *squalidus* and *uetulus*, while commonly used of trees, are equally at home in the human sphere, not least in the sphere of human old age. To take *squalidus* first. Pliny, for example, speaks of the plebeian myrtle mentioned above as *retorrida ac squalida* during the era of senatorial ascendancy (*HN* 15.121), but persons can equally be *squalidi* (Plaut. *Truc.* 933, *huncine hominem te amplexari tam horridum ac tam squalidum?*; Lucr. 5.956 *squalida membra*), and the term is often applied, in differing contexts, to the aged:<sup>31</sup> cf. Ter. *Eun.* 235–6, *hominem ... l uideo sentum squalidum aegrum, pannis annisque obsitum*; Plin. *Ep.* 4.9.22, *et in procero corpore maesta et squalida senectus*; Apul. *Met.* 6.18, *huic squalido seni*.<sup>32</sup> Again, while *tristis* is often used, as here, of trees or plants in a 'wretched' condition,<sup>33</sup> or else, in reference to the *arbor infelix* concept, of trees which do not yield flowers or fruit,<sup>34</sup> the adjective is also self-evidently applicable to humans. Significantly, it was twice used by Virgil to characterize old age (*tristisque senectus*, *G.* 3.67, *Aen.* 6.275) – passages which Seneca quotes more than once in his Epistles, suggesting that its association with *senectus* may be in play subtextually here.<sup>35</sup> The same duality of reference to the human and arboreal realms is likewise seen in the rare adjective *nodosus*.<sup>36</sup> Used both here and elsewhere of wood that is 'knotted' or 'gnarled' (cf. Luc. 3.440, *nodosa ... ilex*; Plin. *HN* 16.65, *materies [tiliae si mas est] nodosa*; Juv. 8.247, *nodosam ... uitem*),<sup>37</sup> *nodosus* can also characterize the knot-like deformations of the joints caused by gout,<sup>38</sup> a disease from which Seneca

<sup>28</sup> Nisbet (n. 27), 207.

<sup>29</sup> P. Hardie, 'Statius' Ovidian poetics and the tree of Atedius Melior', in R. Nauta, H.-J. Van Dam and J. Smolenaars (edd.), *Flavian Poetry* (Leiden, 2006), 207–21.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Nisbet (n. 27).

<sup>31</sup> In part perhaps for the sake of the alliteration with *senex* or *senectus*? See, in addition to the examples cited immediately below in the text, Seneca the Elder, *Contr.* 1.1.19 *senex squalidus barba capilloque*; Sen. *HF* 765 *squalidus ... senex*.

<sup>32</sup> Based, like the *HF* passage quoted in the preceding note, on Virgil's famous description of the infernal ferryman, *Aen.* 6.298–9, 304 *portitor has horrendus aquas et flumina seruat / terribili qualore Charon ... iam senior*.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Plin. *HN* 13.120, 17.33; Sen. *Ep.* 86.19.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Plin. *HN* 16.95 *non enim omnes (arbores) florent, et sunt tristes quaedam quaeque non sentiant gaudia annorum*, 16.50; Hor. *Od.* 2.13.11; J. André, 'Arbor felix, arbor infelix', in M. Renard and R. Schilling (edd.), *Hommages ... Bayet* (Brussels, 1964), 35–46.

<sup>35</sup> *Epp.* 107.3, 108.24, 29.

<sup>36</sup> See J.F. Gaertner, *Ovid, Epistulae ex Ponto, Book 1* (Oxford, 2005), on Ov. *Ex P.* 1.3.23–4.

<sup>37</sup> The reference in the Juvenal passage is to the centurion's baton of vine-wood. For *nodosus* of wood, cf. also Plin. *HN* 16.196, 17.176.

<sup>38</sup> Hor. *Ep.* 1.1.31 *nodosa ... cheragra*; Prud. *Perist.* 10.495 *nodosa ... podagra*.



may possibly have suffered<sup>39</sup> and which tended, it seems, to increase in severity with the onset of old age (Plin. *Ep.* 1.12.4–6).<sup>40</sup> Since, however, gout was usually caused by prolonged over-indulgence in food and drink,<sup>41</sup> a vice of which Seneca was certainly not guilty,<sup>42</sup> *nodosus*, if it has a human referent, more probably refers to arthritis, characteristically an affliction of old age: for writers often speak in medical contexts of *articulorum* or *neruorum nodi*,<sup>43</sup> ‘knotty lumps at the joints/sinews’, almost certainly a reference to the disfiguring excrescences around the joints, the so-called Heberden’s nodes, which are characteristic of the degenerative disease osteoarthritis.<sup>44</sup> Of particular interest in this connection is Prud. *Perist.* 10.495, *nodosa torquet quos podagra et artritis*, where *nodosa* characterizes arthritis as well as gout. Of the five adjectives used by Seneca to describe the deteriorated condition of his plane trees, *retorridus*, which refers to a ‘shrivelled’ or ‘dried up’ appearance in trees or plants,<sup>45</sup> is, on the face of it, the least likely to conceal a secondary allusion to Seneca’s old age. But the word is occasionally used of living creatures who are getting on in years;<sup>46</sup> and it might suggest the drying up of the vital juices which, according to humoral theory, was characteristic of old age;<sup>47</sup> interestingly, Galen (1.582 Kühn) compared old persons to a plant that, initially moist and soft, gradually dries out. Much more promising however for our argument is the last of the words applied to the planes, *uetulus*. Although *uetulus* is a technical term for an old tree,<sup>48</sup> a passage of Cicero seems to indicate that the adjective, thus used, is a metaphor derived from the process of growth and ageing in animals and humans,<sup>49</sup> once more suggesting a symbiosis between the world of man and the world of trees. And that *uetulus* is meant to call to mind the physical decline of Seneca himself is strongly suggested by another consideration. With the exception of the just-noted application to old trees, and a Catullan-inspired reference to ‘aged’ wine,<sup>50</sup> *uetulus* is almost invariably used of elderly living creatures, most particularly old men and women, e.g. Plaut. *Merc.* 314, *uetulus decrepitis senex*; *Epid.* 666; *Cic. Att.* 13.28.4, *Cornificiam ... uetulam sane et multarum nuptiarum*; *Juv.* 13.55, *si iuuenis uetulo non adsurrexerat*. A concealed allusion to Seneca’s senescence, in short, seems almost incontestable.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Epp.* 53.6, 78.9; Griffin (n. 10), 19.

<sup>40</sup> The sufferer in Pliny in fact contracted the disease, which was hereditary in his family, in his thirties, but the pain increased greatly as he grew old.

<sup>41</sup> See L. and P. Watson, *Martial: Select Epigrams* (Cambridge, 2003), 320.

<sup>42</sup> At least if we believe his protestations of ascetism, for which see *Epp.* 83.6, 87.1–5, 108.15–16, 123.1–3. Also relevant: *Ep.* 108.21 ad fin.; *Tac. Ann.* 15.45.3, 63.3.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. Plin. *HN* 24.21, 30.110; Marcell. *Med.* 35.2.

<sup>44</sup> For the prevalence of this from middle age onwards in the Roman world, see R. Jackson, *Doctors and Diseases in the Roman Empire* (London, 1988), 176–7. Pliny (*Ep.* 8.18.9) describes graphically the agonies of an elderly sufferer.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Plin. *HN* 15.121 on the plebeian myrtle, cited above; Sen. *De ira* 3.15.4 *uides illam arborem breuem retorridam infelicem?*; *Ep.* 86.18 *nec magna pars eius quemadmodum in oliuetis uetibus arida et retorrida erit*.

<sup>46</sup> Gell. *NA* 15.30.1 *qui ab alio genere uitae detriti iam et retorridi ad litterarum disciplinas serius adeunt*; Phaedr. 4.2.16–17 *post aliquot uenit saeculis retorridus (mus) / qui saepe laqueos et muscipula effugerat*.

<sup>47</sup> For the loss of sap in the elderly, cf. E. Eyben, ‘Antiquity’s view of puberty’, *Latomus* 31 (1972), 677–97, at 679–82.

<sup>48</sup> Lucr. 2.1168 *uetulae uitis*; Serv. ad Verg. *Ecl.* 3.11 and G. 4.144.

<sup>49</sup> *Cic. Fin.* 5.39 *earum etiam rerum quas terra gignit educatio quaedam et perfectio est non dissimilis animantium; itaque et uiuere uitem et mori dicimus, arboremque et nouellam et uetulam et uigere et senescere*.

<sup>50</sup> Catullus 27.1 *minister uetuli puer Falerni* initiates the trend.

If, as suggested above, the first two *exempla* of old age – the decrepit building and the deteriorated planes – are unreal or at least involve an embellishment of reality with an overlay of literary symbolism and metaphor, then there is no reason why we should take the Felicio episode as the exact truth either. One element of literary invention might be the names of both Felicio and his father, both of which sound suspiciously appropriate in the context. Philositus, ‘lover of grain’, is a conveniently suitable name for a *uilius*,<sup>51</sup> while the use of the name Felicio, ironic in the context (he is anything but *felix*), could be an example of the literary commonplace whereby proper names are applied to slaves in a jesting fashion.<sup>52</sup> Felicio and his father could be either literary constructs, or else real slaves who are given appropriate pseudonyms.

Felicio’s aged appearance might also be fictitious, or at least exaggerated for the occasion. It is worth at this point considering how old he would be, if he existed, in A.D. 63–4, the dramatic date of the letter. Now Seneca jokes that it is Felicio’s loss of teeth which makes it likely that he is the *pupulus* (‘little boy’)<sup>53</sup> that his master once knew. The image Seneca has in mind is the toothless smile of a child whose milk teeth have fallen out (cf. *dentes illi cum maxime cadunt*),<sup>54</sup> which usually happens at around five to seven years of age.<sup>55</sup> If the estate was acquired no earlier than c. A.D. 13 (cf. n. 14 above), then Felicio would be no more than in his mid fifties in A.D. 63–4, but possibly younger.<sup>56</sup> To modern eyes, a person of this age would hardly be expected to present the appearance that Seneca attributes to Felicio, and we might therefore conclude that the description is a fiction, although when the living conditions and life expectancy of the average Roman slave are taken into account, it might not seem improbable that a slave over fifty could have deteriorated physically to the point of decrepitude.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, the description is hyperbolically comic, and is

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Apuleius’ Philetherus (‘he who loves [amatory] hunting’), *Met.* 9.16, and Philebus, *Met.* 8.25 (‘boy-lover’), for meaningful names prefaced by *phil-*. One thinks here also of the names of two of the interlocutors in Varro’s *Res Rusticae*, Stolo, (‘Shoot, Sucker’) and Scrofa (‘Pig’), which, although genuine, are clearly selected for the sake of a pun on the agricultural context; cf. 1.2.9, 2.4.1.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Mart. 3.34 with Watson and Watson (n. 41), 324. This argument is not of course conclusive, since both are real names. Philositus is rare: H. Solin, *Die griechischen Personennamen in Rom: Ein Namenbuch* (Berlin/New York, 1982), 1.165–6 lists ten examples, of which seven are definitely slaves or freedmen (cf. H. Solin, *Die stadtrömischen Sklavennamen* [Stuttgart 1996], 1.235), which could argue either way, i.e. that Philositus is real, or that his name is invented to suit the context. Felicio is fairly common (23 examples in Solin [1996], 93; there was a slave cobbler with this name in Domitian’s court: see M. Charlesworth, ‘Flaviana’, *JRS* 27 [1937], 54–62 at 61–2); it is used of a real *delicium* on a tombstone, discussed by Setaioli (n. 1), who argues that the name might have been given to pet slaves who enjoyed the special favour of their owners.

<sup>53</sup> The unusual diminutive is found only elsewhere in Catullus 56.5, where it refers to a *puer delicatus*, and some (e.g. Costa [n. 6] ad loc.) see a sexual sense here too, but this is unwarranted.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Summers (n. 6), ad loc.; R.M. Gummere, *Seneca Epistles 1–65* (Loeb, London/Cambridge, MA, 2002), ad loc.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Plaut. *Men.* 1116 of a seven-year-old: *septuennis: nam tunc dentes mihi cadebant primulum*. The toothlessness of old age can be compared with that of a baby (cf. Juv. 10.199–200), but the use of *cadunt* belies that interpretation here. Also, Felicio asks *non cognoscis me?* and it is hardly likely, even in fiction, that a person one had known only as a babe-in-arms would be recognizable 50 years later.

<sup>56</sup> This assumes that he was taken up as a *delicium* (cf. n. 6 above) in the same year that Seneca built the estate and that he was then at least five years old, but if he had become a *delicium* a little later than A.D. 13, and/or had been taken up as an infant, Seneca remembering him as he was at a slightly older age, then he could be as young as fifty in A.D. 63–4.

<sup>57</sup> Of interest here is a discussion in the jurist Paulus (*Dig.* 21.1.11: cf. Gell. *NA* 4.2.12) of whether the discovery of tooth loss in a slave could be considered valid grounds for returning the



deeply infused with literary sneers against the aged.<sup>58</sup> Old people are, for instance, frequently likened to corpses, as Felicio is here (*quis est ... iste decrepitus et merito ad ostium admotus? foras enim spectat ... alienum mortuum*).<sup>59</sup> Such insulting comparisons are particularly common in invective against old women, so-called *Vetula-Skoptik*, the most striking case being Mart. 3.93.18–27, an extended verbal assault on a *uetula* as *cadauer*, but elderly males are also so described: most notably, Seneca the Elder records a declamatory *color* used by *Latro*, in which the use of an old male slave as a model for a painting of Prometheus, which involved the torture and consequent death of the slave, was excused on the basis that he was as good as dead in any case.<sup>60</sup> Equally grounded in the thematic armoury of comic taunts against the elderly is the subject of toothlessness.<sup>61</sup> As before, ageing women are the primary targets of such jeers, but elderly males are by no means exempt. Thus the lecherous *uetulus* of Plautus' *Casina* is insultingly described as *illius hirqui improbi, edentuli* (550), a similar characterization is applied in the 'mad scene' of the *Menaechmi* to the *senex* of the play (864), while an epigram of Martial (6.74) satirizes the vanity of an old man who attempts in vain to disguise his loss of hair and teeth. Lastly, the combined sneer that, in claiming – as if in his dotage – to have been Seneca's one-time *delicium*, and in dropping his teeth, Felicio has become like a child (*pupulus*) again, once more echoes a theme typically encountered in mockery of the elderly; for it was a commonplace of such sneers, canonically expressed in Juvenal's *madidique infantia nasi*, that the old regress mentally and physically to childhood.<sup>62</sup>

We have demonstrated by a close analysis how Seneca's description of his visit to the estate in sections 1–3, in terms of its themes, symbolism and diction, is an embroidered version of real life, overlaid with a patina of literary referentiality. Let us now briefly consider how the passage functions as a lead-in to the rest of the Epistle. Seneca begins *Epistle* 12 with the observation *quocumque me uerti, argumenta senectutis meae uideo*, thus announcing by reference to his own situation the central theme of the Epistle, old age and how one should react to it. Sections 1–3 take the form of an 'autobiographical' flashback showing how the author comes to an acceptance of his own *senectus*. In it he moves through successive stages of increasing self-awareness, marked by a movement from anger at the *uilius*, who puts it to him that the dilapidated condition of the buildings is due to old age rather than neglect, to a wry aside acknowledging that Seneca, like his trees, is growing old, and finally to mockery at Felicio's expense, culminating in the joke about toothlessness, which is designed to cloak Seneca's discomfort at having implicitly to concede that he himself is growing old. This growth of self-awareness<sup>63</sup> is crystallized at the opening of section

slave to the seller as faulty goods: *cui dens abest, non est morbosus: magna enim pars hominum aliquo dente caret neque ideo morborum sunt: praesertim cum sine dentibus nascimur nec ideo minus sani sumus donec dentes habeamus* – *alioquin nullus senex sanus esset*.

<sup>58</sup> A point already suggested by the description of Felicio as *decrepitus*. The word is old-fashioned, as Summers (n. 6) notes ad loc., and belongs more to the world of Roman comedy, where sneers against the elderly are legion, than to current usage. For the comic/invective tradition of attacks on old people see Parkin (n. 5), 86–9; cf. Cokayne (n. 5), 16.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Mart. 3.32.2, 10.90.2, and Hor. *Epod.* 8.12 with Watson (n. 26) ad loc.

<sup>60</sup> Sen. *Contr.* 10.5.17. Cf. also Parkin (n. 5), 64.

<sup>61</sup> For sneers against tooth loss in the old, cf. Parkin (n. 5), 83–4.

<sup>62</sup> Juv. 10.199. For the perception of old age as a return to childhood see Parkin (n. 5), index s.v. 'second childhood'.

<sup>63</sup> Seneca's attainment of self-awareness about his old age is vividly illustrated in later Epistles,

4 by the admission *debeo hoc suburbano meo, quod mihi senectus mea, quocumque aduerteram, apparuit*, which then gives rise in the ensuing sections of the Epistle to philosophical commonplaces on the folly of fretting over the imminence of death and the necessity of living each day as if it were one's last.

The prooemium to the Epistle, then, is concerned with tracing, by a combination of circumstantial details and literary symbolism (the symbiosis between the villa/Felicio and Seneca's aged frame), the process whereby Seneca rids himself of his reluctance to accept that he really has become old. This prepares the ground for the central hypothesis of the Epistle, that old age is something to be embraced positively, rather than feared as signifying the approach of death.<sup>64</sup>

### THE PROOEMIUM IN A BROADER CONTEXT

Not only do sections 1–3 serve as a prooemium to *Epistle* 12, but they also exemplify some broader patterns relating to Seneca's protreptic techniques in the Epistles as a whole: (1) the use of supposedly biographical details as a peg on which to hang a moral or philosophical discussion and (2) self-criticism.

(1) We have seen how Seneca's description of a visit to his villa is employed as a springboard for his reflections on old age. The technique of introducing philosophical discussion via a personal 'experience' or some circumstance that impinges on Seneca's consciousness is a common one in the Epistles. For instance, an attack of seasickness, caused by an ill-advised dash across the Bay of Naples, sparks a disquisition on how blindly we ignore our shortcomings both physical, and, more important, spiritual (*Ep.* 53), while in *Ep.* 80 the freedom from interruption occasioned by a boxing match and mention of the attendant athletic regime suggest, rather factitiously, a lecture on the need to train the mind, rather than the body.

As in *Epistle* 12, it is important not to underplay the literary artifice and fictional nature of these highly circumstantial prooemia. Thus the account in *Epistle* 53.3–4 of the (seasick) Seneca stumbling over the rocks of the shore after being hastily decanted from his boat is strongly reminiscent of genre-scenes of shipwreck, a literariness underscored by a facetious reference to the various *naufragia* suffered by Ulysses in the *Odyssey*. Again, the description in 87.1–4 of the asceticism of the two-day journey undertaken by Seneca and Maximus, which serves as a platform for a sermon on the superfluosity of material possessions, reads like a perambulatory version of the hackneyed theme of the simple life. And sometimes the element of literary contrivance is more obtrusive still. Are we really to believe that Seneca accidentally stumbled into a noonday intermission at the games without some prior awareness of the carnage that was to be expected there (*casu in meridianum spectaculum incidi, lusus expectans et sales ... contra est*, 7.3)? Did he, one of the richest men in Rome, really set up house above the baths (*Ep.* 56) in order to test the capacity of his philosophical tranquillity to screen out obtrusive noises,<sup>65</sup> or is the colourful and detailed account of the various noises resounding in the baths, which is occasioned by Seneca's living-

where he turns upon his own person the same jokes as he had previously directed against Felicio, describing himself in 26.1 as *decrepitos* (*inter decrepitos me numera*) and repeating in 83.4 the jest at 12.3 which conflates the dropping of milk teeth with tooth loss in the elderly.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. 12.4 *complectamur illam (sc. senectutem) et amemus; plena est uoluptatis, si illa scias uti*; in section 6 Seneca rejects the argument *molestum est ... mortem ante oculos habere* with the remark *primum ista tam seni ante oculos debet esse quam iuueni*.

<sup>65</sup> So he claims at the conclusion of the letter §15 *experiri et exercere me uolui*.

quarters, simply a simulated piece of autobiography, a literary *tour de force* designed to carry the message that *illa tranquillitas uera est, in quam bona mens explicatur* (56.6), whereas the generality of mankind, bedevilled by greed and ambition, start at every disturbance? These and similar passages give a strong impression of a kernel of fact or even pure invention rounded out by a literary circumstantiality which both satisfies Seneca's artistic ambitions<sup>66</sup> and subserves his larger didactic purposes as a proselytizer for Stoicism.

(2) Let us turn now to the subject of self-criticism as a strategy pursued by Seneca to render his teachings more palatable by displaying his own moral shortcomings.<sup>67</sup> Again, the prooemium to *Epistle* 12 exemplifies a technique which is on display in the *Epistles* as a whole. Two notable instances may be pointed to in *Epistle* 12. The first involves the bad temper which Seneca exhibits towards the *uilecus* at the dilapidated condition of his estate (1–3). Here Seneca depicts himself acting in a way that contradicts his own advice given elsewhere in the *Epistles* and in his earlier work *De ira*, that one should not succumb to anger. In *Epistle* 47, for instance, a disquisition on the treatment of slaves, he proclaims that a master should in general show himself *hilaris* towards his *serui* (17), while at the conclusion of *Epistle* 18, apropos of remarks on ungoverned anger, he suggests that slaves (along with enemies) commonly provoke this but that the provocation should at all costs be resisted. Moreover, his displaying anger not only contravenes Stoic principles<sup>68</sup> but is especially inappropriate for one who professes Stoicism, because he depicts himself as acting thus in full awareness of what he is doing (*iratus illi proximam occasionem stomachandi arripio*).<sup>69</sup>

The second example in the *Epistle* of self-criticism comes in the Felicio episode. Scholars have often commented on Seneca's callousness or indifference in levelling seemingly malicious jokes at the pathetic old slave.<sup>70</sup> In our judgement, however, it is more productive to view these as a consciously contrived strategy, again involving self-criticism, which is integral to the didactic effect of the whole.<sup>71</sup> The series of ageist jokes sets Seneca up for a fall when it is revealed by Felicio that the philosopher is even older than his quondam *delicium*. The effect is further heightened when, even after Felicio has revealed his identity, Seneca attempts to mask his embarrassment at the situation by making a further tasteless sneer about toothlessness. The overall outcome of the Felicio scene is to portray Seneca in a ludicrous light. What is the

<sup>66</sup> Griffin (n. 10), 418–19; Wilson (n. 11).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Griffin (n. 10), 277, 417; Richardson-Hay (n. 9), 37–40.

<sup>68</sup> The Stoic condemnation of the passions, not least anger, is too well known to need rehearsing here. See for instance, W.V. Harris, *Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA/London, 2001), 104–18. In Seneca's *Epistles*, see esp. 51.8, 71.37 and 85.12.

<sup>69</sup> One might compare Seneca, *Thyestes* 488–9 and 543–4, where Thyestes yields to the urgings respectively of his son Tantalus and Atreus to take up once more the reins of power, acting thus despite a keen awareness that he is doing an unwise thing, but unable in the end to resist the allure of kingship.

<sup>70</sup> E.g. Wiedemann (n. 1), 128–9 'Seneca's story about how he failed to recognise his old playmate is an illustration of the callous ancient attitude to old age generally'; Parker (n. 1), 242, n. 56 [Felicio's remark] 'makes no impression on Seneca, despite his professed sympathy for slaves (*Ep.* 47 etc)'; A.J.L. Van Hoof, *From Autothanasia to Suicide* (London/New York, 1990), 34 'the self-centred Stoic has eyes only for his own sorry fate'; Bradley (n. 1), 130 'what would Seneca's slave Felicio have thought of the Stoic virtue his master preached?'; Setaioli (n. 1), 149. Coleman (n. 2) says Seneca's 'coarse picture of the toothless old dotard seems callous until we realize that Seneca sees in him a reflection of himself'.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Coleman, cited in previous note, and Henderson (n. 7), 26.

purpose of such self-mockery? It must be to show in the most colourful way possible that Seneca himself is not immune to the faults, in this case a lack of self-perception, which he would seek to eradicate in others. The technique in play here, whereby the philosopher deliberately places himself in a false or risible position in order to exemplify his own fallibilities, is repeated in other Letters. For instance, in *Ep.* 53 the overblown picture of Seneca's seasickness, following a sea-journey unwisely undertaken,<sup>72</sup> which sees him clambering over rocks, recontextualizing his enthusiasm for cold water dips and ascribing Ulysses' multiple shipwrecks to an attempt to escape *mal de mer*, functions as a comic exemplification of the Epistle's moral, that we are all too readily led to ignore our failings, both physical and spiritual.

Humour deployed by Seneca at his own expense is, as we have just seen, one vehicle whereby he engages in a salutary self-criticism. In a similar effect, self-criticism can be implied by an inconsistency between what Seneca says and how he presents himself as acting. Thus, in the Epistle on the Baths, the comment that he is able to control his thoughts to such an extent that he can ignore the sounds coming from below is in conflict with his exceedingly detailed description of the various characters whose activities he can hear: if he is really immune to such noises why can he describe them in such vivid detail, and why does he end the letter by saying that he is going to change lodgings in order not to torture himself (*torqueri*) further?<sup>73</sup> A similar phenomenon is seen in the famous Epistle on the Games, where Seneca illustrates the moral that the *proficiens* should avoid crowds because of their corrupting effect by the example of a visit on his part to the spectacles during the lunch-time execution of criminals. Here, the self-criticism is at first more overt: he admits that he returns from the games a worse person, unable to avoid being contaminated by the other spectators (*auarior redeo, ambitiosior, luxuriosior, immo uero crudelior et inhumanior, quia inter homines fui*, 7.3). Later in the Epistle, however, he describes the wholesale slaughter in the arena, and in particular the reaction of the crowd, shouting and thirsting for blood, with vivid disgust (7.4–5); but though this disgust might seem to represent his reaction to the events at the time he was witnessing them,<sup>74</sup> such a Stoic display of imperviousness to the general fascination with bloodshed is at odds with his earlier statement that he left the games tainted by those around him. The reader must conclude, then, that Seneca is superimposing on his account of the spectacle his philosophically coloured reflections after the event, and that in a more subtle form of self-criticism he is describing behaviour on the part of the crowd into which he himself was drawn by their corrupting influence,<sup>75</sup> which is why he leaves the Games, as he says himself, *crudelior et inhumanior*. We might even speculate that his disgust is all the more

<sup>72</sup> 53.1 *Quid non potest mihi persuaderi, cui persuasum est ut nauigarem?*

<sup>73</sup> *Ep.* 56.15. Cf. Costa (n. 6), 174 ad loc. For a similarly revealing comment at the end of a moral diatribe, cf. the remark of Thyestes which concludes his laudation of the simple life as opposed to temporal kingship, *immane regnum est posse sine regno pati*, where *pati* notoriously betrays a hankering for the trappings of power which belies his previous brave words (Sen. *Thy.* 470).

<sup>74</sup> C. Richardson-Hay, 'Mera Homicidia: a philosopher draws blood – Seneca and the gladiatorial games', *Prudentia* 36 (2004), 87–146, at 119 envisages Seneca as standing aloof from the mob, a lone voice of protest which is not heard above the general din; she fails to address the inconsistency between this and Seneca's earlier admission of being contaminated by his surroundings.

<sup>75</sup> This is not, of course, to say that the incident is real, but that such behaviour would be consistent with the dramatic situation created in the Epistle.

virulent for being directed not just towards the crowd but towards his own *imbecillitas* for having been unable to withstand their degrading influence.

The specific instances just discussed are part of a broader strategy pursued by Seneca in the *Epistles* of underlining at every turn his own fallibilities and shortcomings as one who is striving imperfectly towards philosophical enlightenment. Not only does he regularly include himself in the generality of humankind when he talks of their follies and imperfections (e.g. 59.9–11 to cite one example among many), but he also repeatedly foregrounds his own deficiencies as a *proficiens* who falls lamentably short of the mark. Examples include 27.1, ‘*tu me’ inquis, ‘mones? Iam enim te ipse monuisti, iam correxisti? Ideo aliorum emendationi uacas?’ Non sum tam improbus, ut curationes aeger obeam, sed tamquam in eodem uale tudinario iaceam, de communi tecum malo conloquor et remedia communico. Sic itaque me audi, tamquam tecum loquar*, 45.4, *sed qualescumque sunt (libri mei), tu illos sic lege, tamquam uerum quaeram adhuc, non sciam, et contumaciter quaeram*; 57.3, *non de me nunc tecum loquor, qui multum ab homine tolerabili, nedum a perfecto absum*. This idea comes particularly to the fore in *Epistle* 12 in the shape of Seneca’s bad temper towards the *uilius* which we discussed earlier, instantiating as it does his inability to implement consistently the principles which he inculcates, a shortcoming which he highlights in *Epistle* 75 apropos of a discussion of the three classes of *proficientes*. Here he says that he and Lucilius will do well if they are admitted to the third, that is, least advanced, category of *proficiens*, a degree of progress which he exemplifies by saying *tertium illud genus extra multa et magna uitia est, sed non extra omnia. Effugit auaritiam, sed iram adhuc sentit*. Against this background, Seneca’s yielding to anger in *Epistle* 12 shows how far he has to go before he reaches the final stage of philosophical perfection, a condition, according to Stoic thinking, attainable only by a very few quite remarkable individuals.<sup>76</sup>

The preceding paragraph on the issue of self-criticism prompts the larger question of whether Seneca shows this as issuing in some form of moral progression in the *Epistles* as a whole. This is too large a topic to explore here, but what can be profitably noted is that in the penultimate letter of the corpus, 123, Seneca pictures himself arriving at his Alban villa and finding nothing ready for his arrival. But instead of exploding into anger at the situation, he accepts it in a spirit of philosophical imperturbability (*tecum enim de hoc ipso loquor, quam nihil sit graue quod leuiter excipias, quam indignandum nihil [dum nihil] ipse indignando adstruas*). It is hard to escape the suspicion that the incident has been contrived as a positional counterweight to *Epistle* 12,<sup>77</sup> where a similarly unsatisfactory state of affairs in Seneca’s villa provoked an outburst of annoyance, suggesting that by the end of the work, Seneca portrays himself as having attained sufficient self-control and inner quietude not to respond emotionally to quotidian annoyances.

## CONCLUSION

We have, it is hoped, demonstrated, by a close reading of Seneca’s *Epistle* 12.1–3, the full extent of the literary artifice with which Seneca’s description of a visit to his villa is overlaid, and how the ‘events’ recounted serve as a lead-in to the main theme of the *Epistle*, a philosophical discussion of old age. In the second part of the paper, we showed how this use of quasi-autobiographical material to establish the philosophical

<sup>76</sup> See Richardson-Hay (n. 9), 38, n. 67.

<sup>77</sup> Thanks to Marcus Wilson for pointing this out and for help in general.

keynote of an Epistle is replicated elsewhere in the Epistles. We also discussed a second Senecan technique exemplified by the prooemium to *Epistle* 12, the sweetening of his moral instruction by self-criticism and by the use of humour at his own expense.

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