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SENECA ON TRIAL: THE CASE OF THE OPULENT STOIC

MANY CRITICS HAVE DEVOTED their efforts to expounding the inconsistencies between Seneca's actions and his words, without presenting any concrete evidence for such belief. Hypotheses, conjectures, and suppositions of widest extent uttered in baffling generalities, without specific references to the philosopher's writings, form the bulk of their indictment. In support of their imaginative theses, they cite Dio Cassius as final authority, though somehow they have never been motivated to investigate Dio's source or to evaluate his statements truly.

Among these many charges brought against Seneca and forever recurring from century to century is the crucial one condemning his monetary hypocrisy; to these detractors, Seneca epitomizes the Stoic teacher whose preaching is controverted by practice; for them, here is the millionaire philosopher, bawling for poverty.

That Seneca amassed an enormous fortune is attested by several ancient sources.¹ Juvenal (*Sat.* 10.16) refers to him as *praedives*, "very rich," and the philosopher himself in his writings is not reticent about his own great wealth. So large and numerous were his villas and gardens that they were said to rival those of the emperor Nero.²

It is strange but unfortunately true that immense fortune gives rise to immense suspicion. Even a man of most upright character is often suspected of dishonesty if he possesses exorbitant wealth. The philosopher who preaches his doctrine in shabby cloak with unkempt hair is more apt to be respected by his fellow men than the one who glitters amidst prosperity and power.³ Oddly enough, opposition to Seneca's wealth is expressed even by one critic who is willing to acknowledge that Seneca's riches were honorably acquired.⁴ Is it not, then, wealth per se that such a critic is condemning?

No great effort need be expended in discovering the origin and source of the charges that have circulated against Seneca down the ages. According to Tacitus (*Ann.* 13.42), these accusations were first promulgated in A.D. 58 by one P. Suillius, who became angered by the revival of the Cincian Law, which forbade advocates to plead for pay. Feeling that Seneca, as Nero's minister, was the prime mover in this endeavor to constrain him personally, Suillius therefore launched a fierce attack against the philosopher-statesman, assailing him as foe to all the friends of Claudius. His assault contained these charges:

¹ Suet. *Nero* 35; Juv. 10.16; Tacitus *Ann.* 13.42; 14.52, 53, 56; 15.64; Dio Cassius 61.10; 62.2, 25.

² Tacitus *Ann.* 14.52.

³ That Seneca was repelled by this popular type of philosopher is seen by *Ep.* 5.1-6. Cf. Horace *Sat.* 1.3.133-6; 2.3.16, 35.

⁴ F. W. Farrar, *Seekers after God* (London 1874), pp. 53-4.

1) The bookworm Seneca, who had spent his time in idle studies and in the company of inexperienced juveniles, naturally envied those who (like Suillius) served the public, and the larger, good.

2) In the reign of Claudius, while Suillius nobly served Germanicus as *quaestor*, Seneca was seducing Germanicus' daughter.

3) Could Suillius' humble acceptance of a grateful client's fee possibly equal Seneca's defilement of an imperial princess?

4) Moreover, what philosophy, what intellectual genius, had spurred Seneca, within the span of a mere four years, to amass 300,000,000 sesterces? And why had so many testaments irresistibly been drawn in his favor? What doctrine inspired him to lend money to Italy and the provinces at such exorbitant interest?

These accusations, Suillius hoped, would break Seneca's power and influence.⁵ Suillius was right;⁶ within the year, Seneca was made to discover the ominous effects of these very attacks,⁷ ill effects that were to increase steadily throughout his lifetime, that, in fact, were ultimately to cut this life short. And still, Suillius' success was not done; it was larger than this—larger, doubtless, than even *he* could have dared to suspect. For, curiously enough, in the long, unfolding panorama that is 2000 years of history, Suillius' bold wish has been continuously, repeatedly granted.

By A.D. 200, we find Dio Cassius (or his epitomizer Xiphilinus) transmitting these same accusations, embellished, however, by more striking exaggeration and more lively gossip. Here, in essence, are his recriminations:

1) Seneca was not merely the seducer of the poor Julia, Germanicus' daughter;

⁵ R. Waltz, *Vie de Sénèque* (Paris 1909), p.389: "Suillius espérait bien amener assez de mécontents de d'envieux pour troubler la quiétude de Sénèque et ébranler son autorité. Quel triomphe pour ce vétéran de la délation, s'il réussissait à mettre en peril l'homme le plus considéré du siècle!"

⁶ Tacitus *Ann.* 13.42: . . . haud tamen sine invidia Senecae. . . .

⁷ In fact, Nero's own attitude towards Seneca was considerably altered. See W. H. Alexander, "The Tacitean 'non liquet' on Seneca," *Univ. of Calif. publ. in class. philol.* 14.8 (1952) 322.

he was a flagrant seeker after young boys as well. Also, the adulterer with Nero's own Mother (61.10).

2) Although ever criticizing the wealthy, Seneca was most busy acquiring 300,000,000 sesterces; moreover, he absolutely required the possession of five hundred citrus-wood tables, while, in addition, each and every one of these tables stood upon ivory legs; and with them all he served banquets (61.10).

3) Seneca's usury not only drained the provinces, but also incited a rebellion in all of Britain. He had forced upon the misfortunate islanders 40,000,000 sesterces, money that these people in fact did not want; then with the most sudden harshness recalled his loan in its entirety⁸ (62.2).

And so this singular line of criticism develops, extending down to our own day:

1670: John Milton⁹:

. . . Seneca, in his books a philosopher, having drawn the Britons unwillingly to borrow of him vast sums upon fair promises of easy loan, and for repayment take their own time, on a sudden compels them to pay in all at once with great extortion. Thus provoked [*sic*] by heaviest suffering . . . the Icenians . . . rise up in arms.

1837: Thomas B. Macaulay¹⁰:

The business of a philosopher [like Seneca] was to declaim in praise of poverty with two millions sterling out at usury, to meditate epigrammatic conceits about the evils of luxury, in gardens which moved the envy of sovereigns.

1874: F. W. Farrar¹¹:

And in Seneca we see some of the most glowing pictures of the nobility of poverty combined with the most questionable avidity in the pursuit of wealth. . . . Inconsistency is written on the entire history of his life, and it has earned him the scathing contempt with which many writers have treated his memory.

⁸ It is interesting to note that Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.30-39), who gives a detailed account of the rebellion in Britain, makes no mention of Seneca's name nor of any usury.

⁹ *The history of Britain*, Bk.2, from *The prose works of John Milton*, vol. 5, tr. C. R. Sumner (London 1868), p.208.

¹⁰ "Lord Bacon," in *Critical and historical essays* (New York 1875), p.390.

¹¹ *Op. cit.* (n.4), pp.150, 148.

1887: C. T. Cruttwell¹²:

He . . . in the short space of four years amassed an enormous fortune. . . . Seneca is a lamentable instance of variance between precept and example.

1949: H. J. Rose¹³:

Of [Seneca's] works the writer finds it hard to judge fairly, owing to the loathing which his personality excites. . . . [When such a man] takes the tone of a rigid moralist and a seeker after uncompromising virtue, preaching, from his palace, simplicity and the plainest living with almost the unction of a St. Francis praising Holy Poverty . . . the gorge of the reader rises and he turns for relief to some one who either made his life fit his doctrine or, if he behaved unworthily of the best that was in him, at least laid no claim to be a spiritual guide.

1955: Harry E. Wedeck¹⁴:

One of the most provocative features in the *Epistulae Morales* of Lucius Annaeus Seneca is the flagrant discrepancy between his precepts, in regard to wealth and poverty, on the one hand, and, on the other, his manifest disregard, if not defiance, of these precepts in his accumulation of vast riches. . . . We must, therefore, taking into consideration all the factual testimony, conclude that Seneca's contempt for wealth cannot be reconciled with his acquisition of wealth.

Upon such a long, persistent line of criticism rests the case against Seneca and his wealth.

In any defense of Seneca, we must, if we are to judge fairly, cross-examine the original plaintiff. Since we have seen that this host of critics is merely re-echoing the original charges, our concern is naturally not with these men. We must return to P. Suillius himself. What became of him after he made his accusations against Seneca? He himself was tried. Against this man it was easy for Seneca and his powerful followers to present a case. They, in their turn, promptly countercharged that

Suillius had plundered the provincials and embezzled public moneys during his quaestorship in Asia. Since, however, these charges of criminality abroad would have required at least a year for investigation, it was decided to try him for crimes at home. Witnesses were found to testify against Suillius for numerous deaths which he had caused during the reign of Claudius. Suillius pleaded that he had engaged in those crimes in obedience to the emperor. But when Nero alleged that the notes of his adoptive father contained no such orders, Suillius was forced to shift his ground and to impute the guilt to Claudius' wife, Messalina. It was decided that he who had received pay for these crimes should now pay his due penalty. He was convicted, deprived of part of his fortune, and banished to the Balearic Isles. He was said to have enjoyed a life of luxury and comfort there (*Tacitus, Ann.* 13.43).

Was this man unfairly judged? Had he been made to fall, innocent victim of the wealthy Seneca? Or was his mild Balearic fate justly earned? Who was this Publius Suillius? If we are to follow the unprejudiced account of Tacitus himself,¹⁵ we discover the answer in full. The historian describes him as a *delator*, as *terribilis ac venalis* (13.42), a man who had earned the hatred of many (13.42); a pitiless, purchasable spy, devoid of morality, who earned his living and, in fact, enriched himself by making accusations against eminent men of his day.¹⁶ Is it upon this base foundation, then, that an edifice of twenty centuries of Senecan prosecution has been built?

¹² *A history of Roman literature* (New York 1887), p.380.

¹³ *A handbook of Latin literature* (London 1949), pp. 359-60. For W. H. Alexander's scorn of Rose as a literary critic, see "Seneca's *Ad Polybium de consolatione*: a reappraisal," *Trans. of the Royal Society of Canada* 37, ser.2, sec.2 (1943), 33-4.

¹⁴ "The question of Seneca's wealth," *Latomus* 14 (1955) 540, 544.

¹⁵ For endorsement of Tacitus' impartiality, reliability and worth as historian, see William Budham Donne, *Tacitus* (New York 1883), p.182; Henry Furneaux, *Tacitus: Annals I-IV* (Oxford 1886), p.7, and *The Annals of Tacitus* (Oxford 1896), vol.1, pp.31, 34; A. P. Ball, *Selected essays of Seneca* (New York 1916), p.xvi; C. Marchesi, *Seneca* (Messina 1920), p.142; V. Capocci, *Chiera Seneca* (Turin 1955), pp.26-30; Clarence W. Mendell, *Tacitus, the man and his works* (New Haven 1957), pp.219-22.

¹⁶ *Ann.* 13.43; 11.5: *Continuus inde et saevus accusandis reis Suillius multique audaciae eius aemuli; nam cuncta legum et magistratum munia in se trahens princeps materiam praedandi patefecerat. Nec quicquam publicae mercis tam venale fuit quam advocatorum perfidia.*

It is unfortunate that there is preserved no other contemporary report of Seneca's life.¹⁷ The work of Fabius Rusticus, contemporary historian and friend of Seneca, who defended the philosopher against those very charges of Suillius, has not survived.¹⁸ We are therefore left with no contemporary record of Seneca's life, save for the desperate opinion of this Publius Suillius. Think of the barren image we should have of Socrates, had the works of Plato and Xenophon not come down to us and were we wholly dependent upon Aristophanes' description of this Athenian philosopher. To be sure, we should have a highly distorted, misconstrued view. Such is the view left to us of Seneca, if we were to rely upon Suillius alone.

Certainly we can accept none of Suillius' charges as verified fact. It is impossible, in reality, to determine the exact amount of Seneca's wealth¹⁹ or to know the exact means by which it was accumulated. Likewise, we cannot know that Seneca enhanced his wealth in any way by cunning or dishonor; the allegations affirming his legacy-hunting and enormous usury can never be credited with the least validity.²⁰ We cannot bring light, we must not judge, we dare not render verdict upon these grounds. Honor and honesty must restrain us.

We can, of course, establish that Seneca possessed wealth. This was common knowl-

edge. Since he came from a family of wealth and distinction, he naturally inherited much of his fortune. In the *Ad Helviam* (14.3), he praises the care and wisdom with which his mother managed the rich inheritances of her sons.

Furthermore, this inherited wealth was doubtlessly augmented by Seneca's renowned oratory; so successful and popular an advocate was he that he aroused the envy of Caligula himself.²¹ His riches, too, were all the more increased by generous gifts bestowed upon him by the Emperor Nero.²² Although we have no record of it, yet it was possible, too, that he lent portions of this wealth to others, receiving some rate of interest for this service. Such is the common practice, we realize, in every culture, in every civilization that we might choose to study—including our own.

Thus we prove, beyond doubt, that Seneca possessed great wealth. But can we condemn him on this count alone? Indeed we cannot: it will have to be shown that wealth was inconsistent with Seneca's ideals; it will have to be shown that he has falsified his teaching by his actual conduct. This would finally score his hypocrisy.

Before giving our verdict in this matter, it is therefore most essential that we call our last and most important witness concerning any such hypocrisy between word and deed—Lucius Annaeus Seneca himself.

In the *De vita beata* (23.1), composed in A.D. 58,²³ for the purpose of defending himself against Suillius' charges, Seneca writes:

The philosopher will possess ample wealth but it will have been wrested from no one nor stained with another's blood; it will have been acquired

¹⁷ Seneca's younger contemporary, Quintilian, in his *Inst. orat.* 10.1.125-31, restricts himself solely to a discussion of the Senecan style.

¹⁸ Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.20: sane Fabius inclinatus ad laudes Senecae, cuius amicitia floruit. For other references in Tacitus to Fabius as historian, see *Ann.* 14.2; 15.61.6.

¹⁹ G. G. Ramsay, *The Annals of Tacitus*, vol. 2 (London 1909), p.161 n.1: "The fact that the wealth of Pallas is put at this same figure [300,000,000 sesterces] (xii.53.5), as also by Dio (lxi.10.3), suggests that the number is a round one."

²⁰ J. H. L. Wetmore, *Seneca's conception of the Stoic sage as shown in his prose works* (Univ. of Alberta Press 1936), p.48, explains: "Probably he did receive many legacies; he had the gift of making friends, and these would naturally remember him in their wills. Many, too, who were not friends, but who saw in him a person to be courted, would follow the custom of the day and name him as heir or joint heir. In all this, there was nothing inevitably sinister." And Farrar, *op. cit.* (n.4), p.54, points out that "it is not improbable that Seneca, like Cicero, and like all the wealthy men of their day, increased his property by lending money upon interest. No disgrace attached to such a course."

²¹ Suet. *Cal.* 53.2. Dio 59.19.7 also records this incident, in a passage remarkable for its praise of Seneca: Σενέκας ὁ Ἀνναῖος ὁ Λοῦκιος, ὁ πάντας μὲν τοὺς καθ' ἑαυτὸν Ῥωμαίους πολλοὺς δὲ καὶ ἄλλους σοφία ὑπεράρας. . . . To be sure, Dio is not without inconsistencies.

²² Tacitus *Ann.* 14.53.

²³ This date for the *De vita beata* is accepted by the majority of scholars. See, e.g., R. Waltz, *op. cit.* (n.5), p.391 n.3; H. W. Kamp, *A critical biography of Lucius Annaeus Seneca* (Illinois diss. 1930), p.13; I. Lana, *Lucio Anneo Seneca* (Turin 1955), p.233.

without wrong done to anyone, without resorting to base sources of gain; the expenditure of it will be as honorable as was its acquisition; it will cause no man to groan except the malicious.

Critics who have put their trust in the slander of Suillius and Dio must either have been unfamiliar with this passage or else were more prone to believe a *delator* and an unreliable historian than a distinguished philosopher and statesman whose precepts have occasioned a persistent influence upon the great minds of every century.²⁴

Moreover, the works of Seneca abound in references to wealth and poverty. As a Stoic philosopher, he naturally classifies them among the "indifferent" things—things that lie outside the categories of the sole good and the sole evil,²⁵ since only that which is absolutely good, or *virtus*, can be considered a good, and only that which is absolutely bad, or *turpitude*, can be considered an evil.²⁶ Among the "indifferent" things some (e.g. health and riches) are advantages, while others (e.g. poverty and disease) are disadvantages. So Seneca writes²⁷:

Moreover, who among wise men of our school, who regard virtue as the highest good—denies that even those things which we call "indifferent" have some intrinsic worth and that some are more preferable than others . . . Do not therefore

²⁴ For a competent study of such influence, see R. M. Gummere, *Seneca the philosopher and his modern message* (Boston 1922).

²⁵ *Ep.* 82.10; *De benef.* 1.6.2.

²⁶ *De benef.* 7.2.2: nec malum esse ullum nisi turpe nec bonum nisi honestum; *Ep.* 76.19; 82.14; 94.8; *De vita beata* 4.3; 16.1.

²⁷ *De vita beata* 22.4. In this passage Seneca is sensible, perceptive, far different from the simple-minded Stoics whom Cicero finds merely playing with words, with false syllogisms and tricky paradoxes, while failing to make distinctions amongst degrees of evil, and the like (*De finibus* 4.17, 18, 19, 23, 25, 27; although earlier in the dialogue, 3.15, Cicero has Cato, in defending the Stoics, make several of Seneca's points about wealth and indifferent things). For similar statements in Seneca concerning wealth and things indifferent, see *De vita beata* 22.1-2; 24.5; 25.1; *De benef.* 5.13.2.

be deceived—wealth is among the more preferable things.

The wise man, Seneca argues, finds in riches, rather than in poverty, greater opportunity to display his liberality, diligence, and magnanimity (*De vita beata* 22.1). Indeed there is no danger attaching to a man's possession of even exorbitant riches, provided he remains sufficiently detached from them,²⁸ realizing that fickle Fortune who brings gifts equally takes them away.²⁹ To those adverse critics more vituperative than informed, it must be pointed out that this is Seneca's basic meaning when he frequently refers to scorn of wealth.³⁰

That Seneca scorned wealth and yet himself was wealthy, is true. But he wore the gifts of Fortune gracefully, without being possessed by them (*Ad Helv.* 5.3-6; 10.2). While, significantly, it may be said that this guide of mankind, this preacher of humanitarianism,³¹ put his wealth into use, his philosophy into practice, sound evidence of Seneca's generosity is, in fact, guaranteed by both Juvenal (5.108-10) and Martial (4.40; 12.36).

On this note, the defense of the accused must rest. Concerning the charges piled against Seneca and his wealth, any court can render but one resounding verdict: Not guilty; case dismissed.

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²⁸ *De vita beata* 20.3: ego divitias et praesentis et absentis aequae contemnam, nec si aliubi iacebunt, tristior, nec si circa me fulgebunt, animosior. *Ep.* 5.6: infirmi animi est pati non posse divitias.

²⁹ *Ep.* 4.7; 9.12; 13.11; 91.4-9; *Ad Marc.* 10.1.6; *Ad Polyb.* 2.7; 9.4; *De benef.* 1.15.6; 3.22.4.

³⁰ *Ep.* 18.13; 62.3; 92.31-2; 104.34; *De vita beata* 20.3; 21.1-2; *Ad Polyb.* 2.3.

³¹ For Seneca's noble precepts on humanitarianism, see A. L. Motto, "Seneca, exponent of humanitarianism," *CJ* 50 (1955) 315-18. Seneca's reiterated point about the brotherhood of man is emphasized, for instance, by Michael Grant, *The world of Rome* (Cleveland and New York 1960), pp.115-16, 195-8.