

## Dying for Wisdom: Seneca and Socrates in Dialogue

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Classical Studies

*And let us adduce an argument of Plato – for what harm is there in using  
other people’s ideas where they coincide with ours?  
Lucius A. Seneca, On Anger, I.65*

### I. Introduction

In the spring of 399 BCE, surrounded by students and friends, the Athenian philosopher Socrates was condemned to die by drinking a cup of hemlock. Almost five hundred years later, in 65 AD, the Roman philosopher Seneca allegedly chose to recreate his forced suicide in the same manner as Plato’s teacher. Both men were older, both were shunned by the authorities, and both shared a passion for wisdom – but other than that, few similarities remain. Socrates was poor, known for walking barefoot around the streets of Athens, while Seneca was the second wealthiest man in the Roman Empire. Though Socrates never wrote a single line of text, Seneca was an extremely prolific writer; and while Socrates preferred to stay out of politics, Seneca was (for better or worse) part of Nero’s inner circle. The contradictions abound, yet somehow Seneca felt a connection to Socrates that was strong enough to emulate his demise. By focusing on Plato’s *Phaedo* and Seneca’s *Consolatio ad Marciam* and *Letter 65*, this paper seeks to explore the common elements between them, both in their ideas about death and in the philosophers’ manners of dying.

Before we begin, though, a brief word of caution on sources is needed. Even though many centuries have passed between Seneca and our own time, and a considerable number of ancient sources have been lost, we are fortunate to have many of the works cited by Seneca in reference to Socrates. However, since the ancient Athenian did not write, Seneca must have engaged primarily with the dramatic representations of Socrates written by his most famous student, Plato. In this sense, when we speak about Socrates we are not dealing with the historical figure, but with a literary character that is part of the *logos sokraticos* and Platonic philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Of particular interest for the last days of Socrates' life are the *Euthyphro*, the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. We do not know when Plato composed these texts nor whether they were written in chronological order, but when read together, they can give us a fair impression of the last weeks of the philosopher's life<sup>2</sup> that must have impressed Seneca as well. There are also surviving accounts of Socrates by Aristophanes and Xenophon which we will not analyze, as Seneca engaged primarily with the Socratic dialogues of Plato. Therefore, our focus will remain on the *Phaedo* and some passages of the *Apology*.

When it comes to written accounts of Seneca's death, our only extant sources are a trio of second- and third- century works: the *Annals* of Tacitus, Suetonius' *De vita Caesarum*, and Cassius Dio's *Roman History*.<sup>3</sup> The most complete and chronologically close is Tacitus' narration, who does not write a continuous biography of Seneca but rather mentions him in isolated episodes of his year-by-year history of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Tacitus' account is not without controversy, but because Seneca's last words are lost to us<sup>4</sup> and he provides the most complete description of Seneca's

death, our approach shall be to rely on Tacitus as a main source and fill in the gaps with passages of Seneca's own works, especially the *Consolatio ad Marciam* and his *Letter 65*, which survive in their entirety and engage with Platonic concepts of life and death.<sup>5</sup>

## II. The Hemlock Cup

To many ancient Roman thinkers, death was “the final, most crucial moment of self-construction” for this last act of self-annihilation could become “the ultimate demonstration of self-creation and manifestation of [one's] virtues.”<sup>6</sup> Let us then begin at the end, with the death scenes of our respective philosophers. In Plato's *Phaedo*, we encounter a Socrates who has peacefully come to term with his own departure:<sup>7</sup> surrounded by those who loved him, the dying Socrates appears “happily in both manner and words as he died nobly and without fear” (58c), passing away with his mental faculties intact and showing no major physical discomfort after drinking the poison. For Socrates, “the body need not intrude on the final work of the soul as it prepares to depart.”<sup>8</sup> Because he is in full control of himself, Socrates remains as wise as usual, able to hold a conversation and to focus on his philosophy until almost the very end, when he wishes to die in good-omened silence and asks his friends to keep quiet and compose themselves (117d-e). This narration evokes an almost-ideal death, in which a sage dies with calm and courage, reassured in his knowledge that death is “only the getaway to the soul's immortal life. [Socrates] becomes more and more himself as he approaches liberation from the body.”<sup>9</sup> His final words “Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius” (118a) remind us that his playful personality is still intact: traditionally, libations were poured from wine, not poison. But for someone who does not perceive

death as something negative, a libation to the gods may be the best way to celebrate his last hour, even if it must be done with hemlock.<sup>10</sup>

As Plato's retelling of Socrates' death comprises such positive and moving elements, it should come as no surprise that it turned into a model to emulate, particularly within the Roman tradition, where citizens used the figure of the dying Socrates as an *exemplum*. Socrates' final hours helped Romans think through the place of the life of the mind in a world that was turning more and more violent, and where political and military loyalties were becoming more and more important.<sup>11</sup> The *Phaedo* became a prime example of the *exitus illustrium virorum* (exit genre), a type of literature that described death combining historical narrative with lively renderings of direct speech.<sup>12</sup> Such was its influence that Cato the Younger was said to have read Plato on the night of his suicide in 46 BCE, prompting Cicero (who also admired Socrates as a philosophical model) to remark that "*ut tunc Socrati, nunc Catoni*" ("as then for Socrates, now also for Cato").<sup>13</sup> By the time Seneca is forced to commit suicide, the Socratic death would have been the most dignified model to follow, especially for those who sympathized with Stoic principles, the philosophical school favored by Seneca. Socrates resisted pain, did not bow to political pressure nor feared death; his character was consistent with that of the Stoic sage, a man "who by reason conquers death, death in all its aspects, and, by reason, converts it to a principle of life."<sup>14</sup> As Seneca prepares to die, Socrates the sage and the secular martyr who conquers suffering would have best encapsulated the qualities he most admired, making the *Phaedo* the perfect *exemplum* to follow in his last moments.<sup>15</sup>

### III. Death in writing

Lucius Seneca lived in troubled times. Neronian Rome was marked by death, a topic on which the philosopher reflects upon in many of his writings – *Consolatio ad Marciam*, *De brevitae vitae*, *De inmaturo morte*, *De remediis fortuitorum*, *De providentia*, and *Epistulae morales*, amongst others, express Seneca's concern with death as a privileged subject.<sup>16</sup> These texts, however, do not constitute one monolithic *corpus* on dying; if anything, Seneca's strategies for speaking about death are flexible and varied, as is his intellectual engagement on the topic with different philosophical schools. Besides his strong affiliation with Stoicism, we find that Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Epicureanism feature in his arguments,<sup>17</sup> for Seneca "shows himself to be well attuned to situational variability in moral reasoning",<sup>18</sup> discussing and recognizing the merits of other teachers if they advance his own arguments. In the face of such rich intellectual influences, we must ask ourselves what Seneca's philosophical position vis-à-vis death might be and how it agrees with the notions presented in the *Phaedo*. Is he incorporating Platonic ideas in his writings which may stray from his Stoic roots, or does he simply praise and emulate Socrates' death as a cultural *exemplum*? The truth may lie somewhere in the middle.

According to most scholars, Seneca's relationship to Platonism is a complicated one.<sup>19</sup> In part, because earlier Stoics such as Panaetius and Posidonius referred to Plato quite often,<sup>20</sup> making Seneca familiar with many of his ideas through Stoicism; and in part, because Seneca manipulates Epicurean, Stoic, and Platonic philosophical principles for his own purposes, in what can be best described as a functional adaptation of available doctrines.<sup>21</sup> "Seneca feels at liberty to use Plato insofar as the

latter can be used in support of what Seneca understands as his own Stoic position, particularly when Plato has made a particular point particularly well.”<sup>22</sup> Though for the most part Seneca does not provide direct quotes or suppresses the names of the dialogues to which he is referring, it is clear that he has read the Platonic *corpus* and engages in his work with the *Phaedo*, *Theaetetus*, the *Laws*, and the *Republic*. We shall focus now on two concrete examples, the *Consolatio ad Marciam* and *Letter 65*, to better illustrate Seneca’s relation to Platonism, especially regarding his views on death.

#### IV. The *Consolatio ad Marciam*

*Consolatio ad Marciam* is one of the earliest surviving prose works of Seneca, dated around 40 AD. It is addressed to Marcia, daughter of the Roman senator Cremutius Cordus, and mother of Metilius, who has died three years before the consolation is written.<sup>23</sup> Marcia is still in deep mourning over the loss of her son, and in his letter,<sup>24</sup> Seneca appeals to her “strength of mind” (1.1) and reason to change her attitude and stop grieving. In order to do this, Seneca brings together different arguments from a number of philosophic schools, a technique that was common in the genre of consolation, “in the hope that at least one [of these arguments] would prove effective”.<sup>25</sup> Seneca openly acknowledges this when he tells Marcia that “different people should be treated in different ways: some are guided by reason, some require to be confronted with famous names” (2.1). Taking advantage of this open strategy, the first part of the consolation (19.3-22) is an attempt to unstick Marcia from her (commonly held) belief that death is evil; instead, Seneca insists, Metilius died at exactly the right time and death cannot harm him. This line of argument resonates with

Epicurean views that death is the annihilation of the self, therefore “the person cannot be wretched who does not exist” (19.5). Marcia would be familiar with these ideas, since concepts such as the *opportunitas mortis* (timeliness of death)<sup>26</sup> and the Epicurean notions used by Seneca were conventional knowledge for most upper-class Romans. We could say then that Seneca is using common arguments known to Marcia to help her accept the plausibility that death may not be evil after all – in fact it might even be good: “Death is a release from all pains, and a boundary beyond which our sufferings cannot go; it returns us to that state of peacefulness in which we lay before we were born” (19.2). While one could argue that Seneca is sacrificing philosophical consistency by bringing in Epicurean concepts, it is also possible to see his strategy as a therapeutic one, in which he presents arguments that open up Marcia’s reason so that she can make progress and “be ready for a fresh approach capable of expunging any remaining doubts about Metilius’ *felicitas*.”<sup>27</sup> This fresh approach that Seneca uses in the second part of the letter is a Stoic one, but it includes Platonic elements that support Seneca’s argument.

As Seneca carries on in the second part of the letter (23-6), the concept of the *anima* enters the picture: “great souls are never happy to linger in the body: they long to depart and to burst forth” (23.1). Immediately after this statement, Seneca quotes Plato as ‘crying out’ that “the man of wisdom makes death the focus of his whole mind (...), because he yearns for it, passes through life striving for what lies beyond” (23.2). These words reflect a passage from the *Phaedo* on philosophy as a way to prepare for death: “those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy (...) have actually been looking forward to death all their lives” (64a). Thus, the wise man looks forward to

the separation of the soul from his body, and Marcia should be grateful that the soul of her son has been released. In terms of Stoic and Platonic views, the existence of the soul is not a contradiction, but its lack of materiality and immortality could be called an inconsistency between the two doctrines.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that Seneca is bringing up Plato as a great master of the past who can help him get his point across to the grieving Marcia. “Though Stoic as [Seneca] was, his adherence to the creed was never so sectarian that he refused to see that other philosophies had perceived part of the truth,”<sup>29</sup> and that includes Platonism. To sum up, in this *consolatio* “there is a strong Platonic coloring in the dualistic view that makes the soul the true self and the body merely the fleshy prison that binds and corrupts it as it strives to return to its divine home,”<sup>30</sup> but these Platonizing elements are never in direct contradiction with Seneca’s wider Stoic framework and are purposely chosen to help Marcia accept the more complex set of philosophical arguments that can result in the permanent release of her grief.

Let us now look briefly at another example of Seneca’s writings in which Platonic references feature strongly. *Letter 65* was composed sometime in the first half of the 60’s AD; in it, Seneca presents himself as having been unwell the day before and visited by friends later, with whom he shares a philosophical conversation on cause and matter that progresses to include reflections on death. Even though some twenty years have passed between the writing of the *Consolatio* and his letter to Lucilius, Seneca’s views on death show recurrent evidence of his engagement with Platonic ideas: the soul “yearns to win free of the heavy load it is saddled with here and return to the world where it once belonged. For to it this body of ours is a burden and a torment. And



harassed by the body's overwhelming weight, the soul is in captivity unless philosophy comes to its rescue" (7). Seneca does not quote directly from Plato, but his words echo the mind-body dualism found in the *Phaedo*, "the dialogue which makes most sense of Seneca's letter 65 as a whole, rather than just of certain high-profile parts."<sup>31</sup> The letter concludes with a direct reflection on death: "What is death? Either a transition or an end. I am not afraid of coming to an end, this being the same as never having begun, nor of transition, for I shall never be in confinement quite so cramped anywhere else as I am here" (24). This last passage is reminiscent of Plato's *Apology*, when Socrates claims that one "must look forward to death with confidence" for it is better for him "to die and be released from my distractions" (41d-e), though Seneca does not make explicit references to this Platonic text. Rather, he borrows extensively from Platonic language and imagery to get his own point across, using the opposition between soul and body to underscore his scale of values, which are essentially Stoic.<sup>32</sup> For Seneca, the conquest of death is an inward struggle, and the only deliverance from death is wisdom, whose sole agent is reason.<sup>33</sup> As an independent minded Stoic, Seneca feels at ease to engage with Plato and discuss his ideas conversing with his well-read friends, who are able to understand the value of his references and philosophical sympathies.<sup>34</sup>

## V. Conclusion

In his surviving works, Seneca mentions Socrates in sixty-five instances and Plato in fifty.<sup>35</sup> These are unambiguous cases in which Seneca calls the philosophers directly by their names, but the number of times when he refers to them without

informing his readers of his sources is much higher. In *Consolatio ad Marciam* and *Letter 65* both Plato and Socrates come up, as well as allusions to Platonic texts that omit explicit authorship but that interact directly with philosophical ideas regarding life, death, and the nature of the soul. Clearly, Seneca has “a powerful interest in and sympathy for the Platonic branch of the Socratic intellectual family,”<sup>36</sup> but this affinity never contradicts his Stoic roots. Even Socrates’ references to the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* can be harmonized with the Stoic doctrine that accepts a temporary survival of the soul after death;<sup>37</sup> thus Seneca’s attraction to Platonic ideas enriches, rather than takes away from, his own view of philosophy. By strategically using Socrates as *exemplum* and engaging with Platonic discourse as needed, Seneca is able to advance his own arguments and underscore his Stoic values.

With these considerations in mind, it is easy to understand why Seneca had Socrates present when preparing for his own death. In Tacitus’ account, the commonalities between both men are multiple: the events take place in the evening, and are witnessed by an internal audience (*Phaedo*116b, *Annals*15.60.4); the philosophers call for the hemlock themselves (116c, 15.64.3), but before doing so they attend to the domestic concerns of their spouses.<sup>38</sup> A preparatory bath is mentioned,<sup>39</sup> and a discussion on the nature of the soul follows as the philosophers undertake their final exit, remaining fearless in front of their tearful audience (59a, 15.62.2).<sup>40</sup> Yet, for all his efforts to emulate the ancient sage, Seneca fails to die like Socrates. Even though he is granted *illud breve mortis arbitrium* (freedom to decide about his death)<sup>41</sup> by the centurion who delivered the sentence, the arrangements made by Seneca do not deliver the expected results: his body does not release blood quickly enough after

cutting his veins, the hemlock does not give him the restful sleep it gave Socrates,<sup>42</sup> and the calm, joyful transition that he hoped for eludes him. In his *De Providentia*, Seneca had written that God had “made nothing easier than dying” (6.7), but ironically, Seneca’s death evades him and frustrates his desires.<sup>43</sup> His last act, the act of dying, should have been for Seneca the most fulfilling liberation, chosen and enacted in reason, like Socrates’. Unfortunately for him, Neronian Rome was no ancient Athens, and gifted as he was in his intellectual pursuits, Seneca was no Socrates, but a highly intelligent, complex man trying to make sense of the reality surrounding him. Let us hope that Jupiter accepted his libation, and that his knowledge of Plato helped to soothe his Stoic spirit one last time.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This dilemma is better known to philosophers as ‘the Socratic problem. Most scholars, such as Dorion, propose that “since we do not have at our disposal the criteria that would allow us to separate invention from authenticity, it would certainly be more prudent to renounce any hope of finding the ‘true’ Socrates in these writings.” See Morrison, 2011:8-9.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, 2007:102.

<sup>3</sup> These three Roman historians did not necessarily draw upon each other’s narration; rather, their main sources were the Flavian-era writers Pliny the Elder, Marcus Cluvius Rufus, and Fabius Rusticus, whose accounts are lost to us, and their degree of veracity debated. See Ker, 2009:17-18.

<sup>4</sup> Seneca’s last dictated words seem to have been well-known to Romans for an extended period of time; so much that Tacitus does not feel the need to repeat them: “[Seneca] dictated a dissertation. It has been published in his own words, so I shall refrain from paraphrasing it” (XV.62).

In the Middle Ages, Seneca’s last words were part of the so-called *Epitaphium Senecae* (*Anth. Lat.* 667). Though very influential, they are believed to be a literary creation and thus outside our scope of study. See Ker, 2009:70.

<sup>5</sup> There are plenty of references to Socrates and Platonism in Seneca’s *corpus*, including a lengthy speech by Socrates in *De vita Beata* 24-28 which focuses on (and defends) the role of wealth, where ‘the character Socrates’ asks to “Make me conqueror of all the world...I nevertheless prefer to conquer than to be captured. See Ker, 2010:180-181.

<sup>6</sup> Star, 2012:14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Reading the *Apology*, one could even go further and argue that Socrates brings about his own demise: he declines an offer of exile and tells Athenians they should rather thank him than execute him.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson, 2007:14.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, 2007:104.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, 2007:112.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, 2007:121.

<sup>12</sup> Ker, 2009:53.

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- <sup>13</sup> Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 1.74. See Ker 2009:56.
- <sup>14</sup> Caponigri, 1967:491.
- <sup>15</sup> During Seneca's time Romans held a firm belief in the importance of the first and last day of someone's life as capturing the essence of their human condition. This is best exemplified in Valerius Maximus' *De mortibus non vulgaribus* (On extraordinary deaths). See Ker 2009:52.  
The relationship between Platonism and Seneca's Stoic views on death are explored in pages 6-7 of this paper.
- <sup>16</sup> Ker, 2009:74.
- <sup>17</sup> Throughout his surviving works Seneca mentions Epicurus 83 times, Socrates 65, and Plato 50. See Tieleman, 2007:137.
- <sup>18</sup> Inwood, 2005:4.
- <sup>19</sup> See Inwood, Manning and Tieleman in bibliography.
- <sup>20</sup> Tieleman argues that Posidonius even appropriated Platonic heritage and presented Plato as "having anticipated key elements of Stoic psychology". Seneca, however, does not quote earlier Stoics often. See Tieleman, 2007:136-138.
- <sup>21</sup> Zainaldin, 2021:425-428.
- <sup>22</sup> Tieleman, 2007:138.
- <sup>23</sup> Heil and Damschen, 2013:135.
- <sup>24</sup> Although the consolation is usually referred to as a 'letter', it should not be confused with personal correspondence. Seneca's private correspondence is all lost, and what we called 'consolations' were circulated as public writings. See Inwood, 2007:151 on the veracity of Seneca's accounts and Wilson, Ker in bibliography.
- <sup>25</sup> Manning, 1981:14. Consolation was well developed in the Hellenistic age and had become a well-established generic tradition in Rome; in his *Consolatio ad Marciam* Seneca follows Cicero's pattern of consolation most closely.
- <sup>26</sup> Zainaldin, 2021:426.
- <sup>27</sup> Zainaldin, 2021:432.
- <sup>28</sup> Tieleman, 2007:141. For a discussion on Platonism, Stoicism and the immortality of the soul see Reydams-Schils in bibliography.
- <sup>29</sup> Manning, 1981:19
- <sup>30</sup> Zainaldin, 2021:446.
- <sup>31</sup> Inwood, 2007:156. Inwood argues for a closer connection between *Letter 65* and the *Phaedo*, instead of the more commonly established link with the *Timaeus*.
- <sup>32</sup> Reydams-Schils, 2010:201.
- <sup>33</sup> Caponigri, 1967:496-503.
- <sup>34</sup> Inwood, 2007:166.
- <sup>35</sup> Tieleman, 2007:137.
- <sup>36</sup> Inwood 2005:4.
- <sup>37</sup> Reydams-Schils, 2010:200.
- <sup>38</sup> Socrates sends his wife Xanthippe away to spare her distress, while Seneca allows Paulina to die beside him, but ends up sending her away as her presence is distressing him. See star 2012:13.
- <sup>39</sup> Socrates bathes before taking the poison in order to spare women the task of having to wash his corpse (*Phaedo*, 115a). In Seneca's case the sequence is inverted, with Seneca's method of choice not working as desired and a hot bath being the last available resource to die.
- <sup>40</sup> For a complete list of parallels see Ker, 2009:55-58.
- <sup>41</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 60.1.
- <sup>42</sup> Athenians were known for mixing their poisons. It is suggested that the drink taken by Socrates contained crushed opium from poppies as well, increasing the sedative effects. Seneca's mixture might have included a different strain of hemlock, as the family of hemlock plants is a large one. See Wilson, 2007:15-16.
- <sup>43</sup> Star, 2012:13.

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