

## I

## Towards a Senecan tradition

The fifteenth century in Spain was a truly Senecan age. From the early 1430s on, translations of Seneca's genuine and putative writings circulated in various manuscripts, and they figure among the first incunabula to come down to us. But his name evoked a very different image from that of today. In contrast to the prevailing modern view of Seneca as the cold and impassive observer of humankind, the fifteenth century read his moral philosophy as a compassionate guide to the good life. This late medieval reception of Seneca was the result of a long process of transmission characterized by the arbitrary adaptation, distortion or even pure invention of his words.

In order to understand Seneca's unique position in late medieval Spain, it would seem useful in this chapter to examine the steady rise of his fame accompanying the dissemination of relevant texts and to determine how the creation of a legend surrounding the Roman philosopher in early Christian times promoted a pseudo-literature; then to follow the steps whereby the fifteenth-century translators' selection of what should be made available to an emerging lay readership subsequently reduced and transformed Seneca's canon into a set of rules for good conduct and prudent behaviour. Finally, mention will be made of the first booksellers' choice of what should be printed – a choice which was responsible for a yet more restrictive perception of this pagan philosopher.

In this way, Seneca's medieval transmission can be seen as a continuing process of expansion, transformation and exclusion which was moreover greatly influenced by a powerful *vox populi*.

*Seneca's changing image*

From the start, an ambiguous reputation accompanied the reception of Seneca's works. For some, Seneca was the *amicus principis*, given his office as adviser to Nero; for others, he was a provincial upstart from Cordoba and, last but not least, the fabulously rich man who advocated poverty.

However, prejudice against this influential statesman was not unanimous during his lifetime. In the tragedy *Octavia* an unknown dramatist portrays Seneca as the brave and virtuous adviser to the tyrant Nero; Juvenal praises him on the same grounds, adding his appreciation of Seneca's generosity as a patron – a gratitude repeated thirty years later in the words of the poet Martial.

Shortly after his death, Seneca's fame as statesman and author enters the realm of historiography and literary criticism. Tacitus, evoking an *imago vitae suae* in his *Annales*, questions Seneca's morals, while Quintilian, in his evaluation of Seneca's style in the *Institutio Oratoria*, condemns his dialectics as too facile. Nevertheless, neither the criticism of Quintilian and Tacitus nor the more damaging statements of later historians such as Suetonius and Dio Cassius could stem the rising tide of Seneca's popularity. As Imperial Rome gave way to Christian Europe, Seneca's image began to change. New meanings were being discovered in his teaching, and his words were interpreted in Christian terms. In due course, his message was appropriated by Christianity to such an extent that the pagan philosopher became *Seneca noster*.<sup>1</sup>

In response to this urge to accept him as a Christian writer, legends about Seneca's conversion to Christianity and his friendship with St Paul soon began to circulate. This, in turn, produced a fictitious exchange of letters known as *Epistulae Senecae ad Paulum et Pauli ad Senecam*. All in all, there are a mere eight letters from Seneca and six from Paul, a scant correspondence which leaves much to be desired in both style and content. It is all the more surprising, then, that this fictitious exchange of letters was taken so seriously. From the eleventh century on, the letters were either joined to Seneca's genuine *Epistulae Morales* or circulated independently in manuscript collections together with other genuine and apocryphal works.

The main transmitter of the legend was Jerome (*c.* 348–420), who used the letters as a justification for including Seneca in his famous *De Viris Illustribus* 12, in which he states: 'Lucius Annaeus Seneca of

Cordoba, pupil of Sotion the Stoic and uncle of Lucan the poet, lived very temperately.' This preamble is then followed by the much-quoted line 'but I would not have included him in the catalogue of Saints were it not for these letters between him and Paul which are read by many'. Although Jerome meant by 'catalogus sanctorum' only a list of writers on Christian topics, his words gave Seneca's name an aura of near-saintliness, especially as they were uttered in the context of his correspondence with the apostle.<sup>2</sup>

Another interesting feature of the sentence is Jerome's mention of the widespread reading public of these letters: 'quae leguntur a plurimis'. Jerome then goes on to say that, according to these letters, Seneca 'wished he had the same position among his people as Paul had among the Christians', and that 'he was killed by Nero two years before Peter and Paul were crowned with martyrdom'.

With one stroke of the pen, an authority such as Jerome redresses the precarious balance between praise and slander. Seneca, who not long before had been portrayed as teacher of Nero's vices, now surprisingly becomes associated with the Christian martyrs, like them meeting a violent death. Jerome does not say that Seneca was killed by Nero because of his friendship with Paul, but subsequent readers could deduce this from his words and did.

The authority of Jerome's testimony was such that his words were repeated in all Catalan, French and Italian translations of the Letters. As such they were quoted in the Prohemio to the Spanish translation of the *Epistulae Morales* and printed in 1496, thus giving wide diffusion to Seneca's image as a saintly sage. In the style of a dust-jacket blurb, the Prohemio lists all the virtues of the book, finishing with 'Deste sabio Séneca hizo San Jerónimo muy especial mención en el libro que él compuso de los varones claros por tales palabras . . .'. The words in question, of course, refer to his abstemious life, the equally misleading mention of the 'catálogo de los santos' and the letters between Paul and Seneca, 'que de muchos son léidas'.

In Spain, Seneca's status as a native son of Cordoba was as important as his legendary friendship with the apostle. Following in the footsteps of the chroniclers, Alonso de Cartagena (1384–1456), another 'image-maker', proclaims the Roman philosopher as King John II's favourite subject, 'Porque Séneca fue vuestro natural y nacido en vuestros reinos y tenido sería, si viviese, de vos hacer homenaje' (CL4). Cartagena's words, recorded in the Prologue to his translation of

Seneca's *De Providentia Dei*, subsequently appeared in print in 1491, thus authorizing the myth of 'Séneca español'.

Meanwhile, thanks to an equally bizarre process of transmission, Seneca's literary fame increased by leaps and bounds. More than any other Latin author, he enjoyed the questionable honour of having his work pillaged and reattributed to him, his canon rearranged beyond recognition, his words quoted out of context and, what is more, his name attached to work by other hands.

Apart from the apocryphal correspondence between Seneca and Paul which began to circulate in the fourth century, there was another dubious early transmission, the *Formula Vitae Honestae*. This was a sixth-century treatise on the four Stoic virtues, based on a presumed lost work by Seneca entitled *De Officiis*. Although its true author, Martin of Braga, does not mention his source, this hugely popular treatise reappeared in the twelfth century under Seneca's name with the title *De Quattuor Virtutibus*. The popularity of the treatise was due mainly to its analysis of *prudentia*, a virtue which, if used properly, promised to pay great dividends.<sup>3</sup>

Another pseudo-Senecan work which began to circulate at this time was *De Remediis Fortuitarum*, a treatise which is still considered by some to be by Seneca. Like the *Formula*, it was probably extracted from a genuine Senecan treatise. However, like the apocryphal correspondence with Paul, its contents are of dubious stylistic and philosophic merit.<sup>4</sup> It is a short treatise of only a dozen or so folios, taking the form of a dialogue between a querulous Sensus and a comforting Ratio. The complaints advanced concern all types of misfortune, including sickness, old age, poverty, shipwreck, enemies and the loss of family or friends. Meanwhile, Ratio's consolatory words are rather cynical, admonishing Sensus to wipe away his tears and get on with life. The interest of the treatise resides in its relation to the second book of Petrarch's *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae*; however, his point of reference is not the pseudo-*Remediis* but Seneca's genuine work, and the *Epistulae Morales* in particular.

It was not until the twelfth century that Seneca was to conquer the hearts and minds of all medieval readers. At first, *De Clementia* and *De Beneficiis* were the most cherished treatises, and they could be found, together with the first 88 of the 124 *Epistulae Morales*, in the main religious libraries of Europe (Reynolds 1965: 12). The first two books were particularly valued by rulers and princes, *De Clementia* because it dealt with political ethics in its advocacy of tolerance in the name of

expediency, and *De Beneficiis* because it taught how, when and by how much to reward one's dependants. Of these three genuine Senecan texts, however, the *Epistulae Morales* would prove to be a perennial favourite.

By contrast with the seven books on gifts and the long volume on mercy, Seneca's letters to Lucilius attracted those readers in search of short answers to a wide range of practical problems. In fact, Seneca's moral precepts proved so applicable to contemporary life that he soon became the stock-in-trade of those in search of quotable maxims. The medieval need to quote Senecan *sententiae* and *exempla* was best met by diverse sentence collections, of which the apocryphal *De Moribus* and *Proverbia Senecae* are the most conspicuous examples.

By its very title the first collection shows how Seneca's ethics were taken to be a set of rules of good conduct, while the second brings out the proverbial quality of his words of wisdom. Even so, the *Proverbia*, a list of some 365 *sententiae* arranged in alphabetical order, are mostly by other hands. Two-thirds of them (A–M) come from the maxims of the Roman mime Publilius Syrus, the remainder (N–Z) from *De Moribus*, itself a collection of aphorisms culled from Seneca's *Epistulae*, Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum*, the Church Fathers and other sources.<sup>5</sup>

This type of miscellaneous compilation, on which the label 'by Seneca' was stuck to lend it greater authority, fits perfectly into the new learning of the emerging schools and universities. In response to an academic interest in source and commentary, twelfth-century scholasticism evolved an ingenious system affording quick reference to *auctoritates*; by *auctoritas* they meant the famous sayings of an author rather than the author himself. To facilitate location of texts, the material was organized into books and chapters, each with its running titles, rubrics and marginal glosses.

Compiling *auctoritates* required the co-operation of many scholars such as the humble scribe (*scriptor*), the compiler (*compilator*), the commentator (*commentator*) and finally the author (*auctor*), who added his own glosses to those of the compiler and commentator, and so put his final mark on the work. The *auctor* most responsible for elevating the *compilatio* to an art form was Vincent of Beauvais, whose *Speculum* would in turn serve as a source and inspiration for later compilations.<sup>6</sup>

Of interest to those researching the Senecan tradition in Spain is the *Tabulatio et Expositio Senecae* by the Italian Bishop Luca Mannelli, who dedicated his immense compilation to Pope Clement VI in the mid-fourteenth century. A selection from this compilation was translated

by Alonso de Cartagena in the early fifteenth century and proved so popular that it was printed in 1491 as the last book of *Cinco libros de Séneca*.<sup>7</sup>

The collection reads like a genuine anthology of Seneca's work, divided into short treatises, each dealing with a particular topic. The subject under discussion is then illustrated with an extract from a particular passage in Seneca's work, while the glosses give the source of similar sayings, explaining obscure passages and refuting a heretical thought wherever necessary. Thus the medieval reader was able to take note of the whole of Seneca's canon, including the tragedies, and could compare his moral philosophy with that of other classical and Christian thinkers.

Other *compendia* of Seneca's words of wisdom comprise the anonymous *De Institutis Legalibus*, a list of maxims collected from various sources, the *Copia Verborum*, a condensation of the *Formula Vitae Honestae*, the *De Paupertate* and *De Sapientia*, both containing extracts from the *Epistulae Morales*.

Finally, mention should be made of the legalistic *Controversiae* by Seneca the Elder, which were commonly attributed to the son until the end of the sixteenth century. This is a collection of declamatory samples, replete with the sayings of famous orators and organized in an argumentative dialogue. Another work on which the label 'by Seneca' was often stuck was Flavius Vegetius' *Epitome Rei Militaris* on knightly virtues. Thus, to put it in the words of Leighton Reynolds, it is clear that 'Seneca's fame grew fat on works which he had never written' (Reynolds 1965: 112).

Although certain medieval scholars had expressed legitimate doubts as to the authenticity of some of the transmitted texts, genuine and apocryphal works as a rule happily co-existed in medieval manuscript collections and were copied, anthologized, translated and printed as if they were all authentic.

Seneca's medieval transmission and reception end with Erasmus' critical editions of 1515 and 1529 (Blüher 1983: 123–42). The humanist's philological inquiry into the validity of each text once and for all separated the genuine from the apocryphal works, with the exception of the anonymous *De Remediis Fortuitorum* and Seneca the Elder's rhetorical writings. True to his own predilection for clarity and simple language, Erasmus came down rather heavily on Seneca's style, which he condemned even more than Quintilian had done for being bombastic and disorganized. With these reservations, however, Eras-

mus still recommended the moral philosopher, and so 'Seneca castigatus' survived the humanist's surgical knife, thus starting a new era of Senecan reception.

Interestingly, the reduction of Seneca's canon was no impediment to a new wave of interest, dissemination and imitation. On the contrary, the growing neo-Stoic movement chose Seneca as the exponent of fortitude under hardship, a repository of all practical wisdom and a fountain of consolation in the face of increasing disillusion. Montaigne, Caspar Schoppe, Thomas Lodge, Justus Lipsius, Quevedo and countless other men of letters unanimously hailed the Roman philosopher as their favourite teacher of Stoicism. Moreover, a late sixteenth-century anti-Ciceronianism wholly rehabilitated Seneca's style, as witness Justus Lipsius' commentaries in his celebrated new edition of Seneca's complete works printed in 1605.<sup>8</sup>

Although by now Tacitus' *Imago Vitae Suae* was widely read thanks to Lipsius' edition of the *Annales*, this potentially damaging account of Seneca's life did not stop the humanists from considering him an *auctoritas* on ethics. Thus his eminently portable and quotable sentences continued to be a rich source of epigrams, mottoes and other notable sayings.

Concurrently, the sixteenth century renewed its acquaintance with Seneca's tragedies, not because of their moral content, but because of their passionate portrayal of love, death and revenge on the stage. The Elizabethan playwrights in England, their counterparts in France and the *trágicos españoles*, as well as the writers of *comedias*, all owe much to Seneca's dramatic analysis of behaviour dominated by passion rather than reason.<sup>9</sup>

In striking contrast to Seneca's medieval reception as a master in the *ars vivendi*, the neo-Stoics admired him on account of a perceived *ars moriendi*, due in part to the survival of the spurious and death-dominated *De Remediis Fortuitorum*. This modern view of Stoic impassivity in the face of suffering and death on the one hand and of violence and bloodshed on the other persisted through subsequent generations of readers and, in certain respects, is still with us today.

### *Translation as a means of transmission*

A good way to measure the extent to which an author is adopted by a foreign readership is to note the quantity of his work in translation. In the case of Seneca, we come to the startling realization that the

number of his translated books is more than quadruple that for any other classical author in fifteenth-century Castile. If we add to the genuine works the even more popular semi- and pseudo-Senecan translations, the list becomes truly extraordinary (see below, pp. 153–5).

In fact, the success of other authorities fades considerably when compared to that of Seneca's books which circulated in translation throughout the fifteenth century. Of Aristotle's work, only the *Ethics* were translated and printed, while a compendium to these was used in the schools. Plato's *Phaedo* was translated by the same Pero Díaz de Toledo who glossed and translated the *Proverbia Senecae*, but, unlike these, it never reached the European presses. Cicero has long been considered a formidable influence, but in actual fact only three of his shorter treatises were translated by Alonso de Cartagena, who was later to translate six of Seneca's genuine books and six semi- and pseudo-Senecan texts.<sup>10</sup> Despite this, it should be pointed out here that Plato, Aristotle and Cicero remained the cherished authors of the educated classes, who, by definition, did not need the crutch of a translation.

This wide interest in Seneca's moral philosophy seems to be uniquely a Spanish phenomenon. In Italy, the discovery of Cicero's rhetorical works in 1421 sparked a new interest in language and style.<sup>11</sup> The orator's writing was studied, diffused and imitated, and Ciceronianism spread to the rest of Europe. Spain, however, remained faithful to her favourite son, openly preferring Seneca to Cicero.

Castile's preference for Seneca over Cicero cannot be explained in terms of national pride alone. Throughout the fifteenth century Castilian literati consciously valued moral philosophy more than the study of rhetoric, tending to dismiss the latter as a fruitless exercise – as witness Pérez de Guzmán's statement in *Los sabios de España*: 'Asaz emplea sus días/en oficio infructuoso/quien sólo en hablar fermoso/meta sus filosofías' (Blüher 1983: 169).

Perhaps the most eloquent example of this resistance is the long polemic between Alonso de Cartagena and Leonardo Bruni concerning the latter's translation of Aristotle's *Ethics*.<sup>12</sup> One of Cartagena's objections to the humanists' new translation was to his use of neologisms and a Ciceronian concision of expression, which, he argued, detracted from its clarity and meaning. Too much attention to form, Cartagena maintained, obscures the message and invites misinterpretation. Hence his own adoption of plain language in translating



Seneca: 'siguiendo el seso más que las palabras' (Prologue to *De la providencia de Dios* (CL 4)).<sup>13</sup>

In comparison to Bruni's elegant style, Cartagena's technique must have seemed pedestrian, old-fashioned and over-scholastic. In reality, however, Castile's initial opposition to Italian humanism should be seen as a genuine concern for truth and understanding coupled with a fear that too much attention to form would lead to artificiality and hollow rhetoric.

Nor does he speak without experience in this matter. While ambassador to Portugal, and prior to embarking on his translations of Seneca, he had been commissioned by the Portuguese crown prince to translate Cicero's *De Senectute*, *De Amicitia* and *De Inventione* (see Salazar 1976). It seems, however, that he shared his own sovereign's preference for Seneca, judging by his words in the Prologue to his translation of *De Providentia*.

Addressing himself to his patron, King John II of Castile (1406–54), he explains: 'E aunque a Cicerón todos los latinos reconozcan el principado de la elocuencia . . . siguió [i.e. Cicero] su larga manera de escribir y solemne como aquel que con razón en el hablar llevó el principado' (CL 4). The same Prologue gives us other clues as to the why and how of Seneca's popularity. First, Cartagena found it necessary to point out that the king was well acquainted with other classical authors but that he often preferred Seneca: 'Y aunque muchos lees pláceos escoger a las veces a Séneca y no sin razón.' Apart from Seneca's being a Spaniard, the main reason was his talent for giving such poignant advice that it went straight to the heart: 'tan cordiales amonestamientos ni palabras que tanto hieran al corazón'. Then, contrasting Seneca's colloquial style to Cicero's solemn rhetoric, Cartagena becomes quite florid in describing the former's impact on the reader: 'mas Séneca tan menudas y tan justas puso las reglas de la virtud con estilo elocuente como si bordara una ropa de argentería bien obrada de ciencia en el muy lindo paño de la elocuencia. Porende no lo debemos llamar del todo orador ca mucho es mezclado con la moral filosofía'.

Clearly, moral philosophy in fifteenth-century Castile was still the preferred subject of inquiry, and Seneca was seen as a mirror in which man could recognize 'sus costumbres cuáles son buenas o malas' (Cartagena's gloss to 'espejo', *De la clemencia*, BN 6962, fol. 59v).

In addition to offering pointers to good conduct, Seneca's philosophy was considered to be of great psychological value on account of

the *animi remedia*, which were so applicable to contemporary problems. Seneca himself has many a thought on the transmission of these 'remedies'. For instance, in Epistula 64, he talks about the continuous process of passing on previous knowledge, summed up as 'Animi remedia inventa sunt ab antiquis; quomodo autem admoveantur aut quando, nostri operis est quaerere' (*Ep.* 64, 9). In the Spanish anthology this reads: 'Los remedios del corazón son hallados por los antiguos, mas a nos pertenece conocer y escoger la sazón y la manera de la usanza' (Anth. 55, fol. 56v).

A very early example of putting Seneca's 'remedios del corazón' to good use is the translation of his *De Ira*, the first vernacular version of a Senecan treatise in Spain and possibly in Europe. It was translated at the end of the thirteenth century in the court of Sancho IV 'el bravo', a man reputedly prone to fits of anger. It is significant that Seneca's first translated book deals with what he calls an *affectus*, that is to say an affliction or a mental disturbance. This is the word Seneca uses to refer to the Greek *pathos*, by which the Stoics meant a disease of the mind. Of all the *affecti*, Seneca says in *De Ira*, anger is the most destructive, as it causes irreparable harm to oneself and to others. Stressing political ethics but leaving out the philosophical polemic concerning this *affectus*, the Spanish *Libro de Séneca contra la ira y saña* became a suitable 'Mirror for Princes', as the Prologue brings out: '. . . e hizolo [Seneca] a provecho de todos universal, y más señaladamente para los príncipes y grandes señores; porque en los semejantes la ira y saña es muy más peligrosa' (Rubio 1961: 120). Its impact was such that in 1445 Nuño de Guzmán, unhappy with the first translation, commissioned a reworking of the text.<sup>14</sup> This fifteenth-century revision of *La ira y saña* itself forms part of a proliferation of Seneca translations initiated in the court of John II in the early thirties.

Aware of the eminent applicability of Seneca's moral philosophy, the king wished to make the information available to others as well: 'Y no vos contentastes de lo vos entender si por vos no lo entendiesen otros', as Cartagena puts it (*CL* 4). The very phenomenon of translation, a relative novelty in those days, reveals a love of antiquity outstripping their knowledge of Latin. Cartagena's mention of the king's wish to have Seneca translated so that others might benefit from his words points to a lack of Latin among the nobility. A more explicit statement in this respect comes from Pero Díaz de Toledo, who, in the Prologue to his translation of the *Proverbia Senecae*, says that King John had commissioned the translation for 'los de vuestro palacio y si se