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Stuffed and Preserved: The Paradox of Overeating in Seneca's *Epistulae Morales*[1]

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This article argues that the *Epistulae Morales* dramatizes overeating as a problem that Seneca develops throughout the letters. The overeater stuffs their belly with food, dies, and finally becomes a sort of food. This progression signals that issues of food and eating thus bear on Roman social commitments in addition to their expected philosophical significance, since in the pursuit of stuffing the belly the overeater reneges on their social obligations.

Introduction

How should the aspiring Stoic eat? Minimally, according to Seneca. He encourages moderate eating throughout his corpus with many different strategies, including his deployment of Republican military heroes such as Manius Curius Dentatus and Gaius Fabricius Luscinus as *exempla* not for their valor on the battlefield but their eating of farm-to-table meals grown and cooked with their own hands.[2] Seneca

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[2] On Dentatus, *Helv*. 10.8; on Fabricius, *Prov.* 3.6. These figures are frequently connected at least as far back as Cicero (*Sen*. 6.15); see also V. Max. 4.3.7, Plin. *HN* 9.118, and Gel. 1.10.1. A famous remark of Curius, about preferring to rule rich people than to be one, is attributed to Fabricius in Frontinus *Strategemata* 4.3.2 and Gel. 1.14 (paraphrasing Hyginus). In modern scholarship they are therefore often examined side-by-side: see Berrendonner (2001), Vigourt (2001), (both of whom link

also brings to bear Stoic divine providence (*natura*) on eating when he writes 'I am hungry: I have to eat. Whether this bread is cheap or made of soft wheat does not matter for *natura*: she wants the belly not to be delighted but filled'.[3] Though earlier Stoics had shown concern with the moral problems of overeating—two different Greek sources (Diogenes Laertius VII.19 and Athenaeus VIII 345d) preserve an amusing anecdote wherein Zeno gives a fish-devouring glutton a taste of his own medicine—Seneca demonstrates a special interest in the topic. The relationship between overeating and the condition of the *animus*, a material entity for the Stoics, is proportional, as an unhealthy body is symptomatic of a diseased *animus*.[4] Food and eating has a clear application as a philosophical teaching tool (as Richardson-Hay (2009) argues), opens a space for dialogue with contemporary medical thought (Gourévitch (1974)), and also represents a way for Seneca to compete with other producers of Roman literature, especially satirists, for whom eating is always fertile ground for moral exposé and critique (so Motto (2001)).[5]

We might imagine, then, that the body part most associated with eating, the stomach (*venter*), has commanded scholarly attention in proportion with this philosophical significance of eating. But, influenced by the Stoic mandate of the cultivation of the soul, recent scholarly studies on the Senecan body have instead emphasized the degree to which in Seneca's thought the body, for which the belly often stands

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them as *novi homines* and analyze them with the lens of the 'great man' at Rome), Costa (2013) 32 n. 77, and Martin (2019).

[3] *Ep*. 119.3: *esurio: edendum est. utrum hic panis sit plebeius an siligineus ad naturam nihil pertinet: illa ventrem non delectari vult sed impleri*. Later in this same letter he notes that *fames*, hunger, is not naturally acquisitive and it is *luxuria* that looks for a way 'not how it can fill the stomach, but how it can stuff it' (*quemadmodum non impleat uentrem sed farciat*, 14). For the text of the *Epistulae Morales* I use Reynolds' *OCT*. All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

[4] See, e.g., *Ir*. 2.20.3, *Ep*. 122 (esp. 122.4, though this is one of the main contentions of the letter).

[5] For food and eating as literary phenomena in Ancient Rome, two important monographs are Gowers (1993) and Tietz (2013). Both mention Seneca passim but do not focus on him in the sustained manner of the articles mentioned here. For food and eating as an enactment of 'conceptual blending' within the rich field of Senecan metaphor see Gazzarri (2020) 128-130. Del Giovane (2015) devotes a chapter to food in Seneca in her monograph on his place within the ancient diatribal tradition. For the relationship between food and eating and the Roman conception of *luxuria*, see now Berno (2023) 156-165. For seafood imagery in particular as a way in which Seneca marries his teaching of moral and natural philosophy, see my forthcoming article in *AJPh*.

synecdochically, is fragile, fleeting, or grotesque. Shadi Bartsch (2015) 6, for example, discusses 'the debased status of the body in Roman Stoicism' in her analysis of the bodily grotesque in the satirist Persius. She adduces Seneca (*Marc*. 11.1-4) to illustrate her point: 'Seneca dismisses the body as 'a digestive pipe for food and drink', a thing diseased and disintegrating, putrid and perishable' (*ibid*.).[6] R. Scott Smith (2014) 361 similarly explores 'Seneca's degradation of the body and the elevation of the *animus*,' but is agnostic as to whether the originality of this position lies with Seneca or an earlier Stoic. Negative attitudes toward the *venter* in Republican prose do abound, and to the brand of Republican moralism promoted by writers such as Cato and Sallust Seneca owes a clear debt. This influence is often cited in modern scholarship.[7] But for as revelatory as the aforementioned analyses often are, they overlook the seriousness of the Senecan *venter* in both its social and philosophical context—whether influenced to an outsized extent by Seneca's guidance of the soul or the attitudes of his moralistic Republican predecessors.

This article argues that Seneca's concern with overeating goes beyond any expected moral-philosophical critique that we might expect from a Roman prose author. Seneca sees the proper use of the belly as an indicator of an individual's potential participation in society, which in turn suggests its crucial place within his social and philosophical worldview. More specifically, overeating results in the failure of the *venter* to do its duty of properly digesting food. This failure has consequences not only in the moral sphere but the social one, as the person with an overstuffed belly is unable to discharge their duties to other participants in society. Eventually the problem grows to such a height that the overeaters themselves slip down the food chain and are more fit to be eaten than to eat.

In order to recover the importance of overstuffed bellies to Seneca's conception of an individual's usefulness to society I will analyze three of his *Epistulae Morales*: *Epp*. 47, 60, and 122. My collocation of these letters is far from random; Seneca, as he does throughout the *Epistulae*, rewards the attentive reader with plenty of allusions, additions, and

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6 For the body as a container for food see also *Q Nat*. 1 *praef*. 4 and *Ep*. 77.16.

7 Including on the first page of Catharine Edwards' influential 1993 monograph: "By using the traditional vocabulary of Roman moralists, by taking as examples the figures of Scipio and Cato, Seneca situated his text in a long line of Roman moralising' (1).

complements to the wide-ranging discussions present throughout his letters.[8] Recent scholarship in Senecan studies has advocated for an ideal progression of the Stoic *proficiens* through the letters, which build on one another and whose 'arrangement reflects a dynamic teaching experiment' (Griffin (2007) 90) within the 'dramatized education' of the reader (Schafer (2011)). This front-to-back reading informs my analysis of the progression (or regression, rather) linked to the loaded stomach. To paraphrase Catharine Edwards, the imagery of the stuffed belly becomes an aid to self-knowledge and a route to the reader's philosophical progress.[9]

In *Ep*. 47 Seneca explicitly identifies the *officium* of the belly as the proper digestion of food, a duty that the enslaver who stuffs himself has failed to fulfill. *Officium*, 'duty', is a word loaded with both social and philosophical meaning, a slippage which Seneca exploits. He builds on this notion of the enslaver's overeating as a dereliction of social duty with a discussion of social life as relevance to other people in *Ep*. 60. Finally, in *Ep*. 122 Seneca uses birds fattened for feasts as comparanda for a subset of people who embody a different kind of social death, that of sleeping all day and staying awake all night. In addition to dramatizing the final stage of overeating, this letter invites the reader to consider Seneca's veiled critique of contemporary figures such as Nero and Petronius.

Read together, these three letters show the consequences of the improper use of our constituent body parts: excessive eating (as in 47), dying (as in 60), and being eaten (as in 122). Ironically, anyone who misunderstands and misuses the proper role of the belly becomes stuffed and preserved, more fit to be eaten than to eat. This is the paradox of overeating.

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[8] For an account of the structure of the *Epistulae* early in the 20th-century renaissance of Senecan studies, see Maurach (1970). For the unity of form and content in the letters, see Inwood (2007a) and Williams (2015). Two metaphorical explorations of the composite structure of the letters are worth mentioning as well, that of Henderson (2004), who argues that the *Epistulae* mimics a sequence of places for the reader to dwell on their literary journey, and Graver (2022), who argues that the *EM* encourages a 'love relationship with [Seneca's] readers' (12).

[9] Edwards (1999) 253: 'The suffering body is now made to become an aid to self-knowledge, a route to philosophical progress.'

The enslaver's swollen stomach: *Ep.* 47

Our search for the social importance of the belly begins at *Ep*. 47, one of Seneca's most studied letters because of its subject matter: slavery. Indeed, it would be virtually impossible to write about Roman slavery from a literary perspective and omit this letter. For Seneca slavery presents a paradox: one can be enslaved but still free in the Stoic sense, that is, with a free mind (*sed fortasse liber animo*, *Ep*. 47.17). On the other hand, one can be legally free but enslaved to a variety of bodily vices, including the belly.[10] The body and mind are distinct in the sense that (legal) slavery only enslaves the body; as Seneca writes elsewhere, 'Anyone who thinks that slavery extends to the entire person is mistaken. The better part of him [sc. the mind] has been excepted' (*errat, si quis existimat servitutem in totum hominem descendere. Pars melior eius excepta est*, *Ben*. 3.20.1). But slavery to appetites is, as Fitzgerald (2000) 91 puts it, a form of 'true, ethical slavery, into which even the legally free might fall'. Thus, the *animus*, the Stoic soul and indicator of self, is the true determiner of slave/free status; the freedom of the soul is up to the individual and no one else. This is an attractive perspective for a Roman, especially considering the arbitrary nature of legal slavery: even great military leaders, like the famous Regulus, could be enslaved since slaves were often prisoners of war. The character Tyndarus from Plautus' *Captivi* succinctly describes the tenuous balance of legal slavery and freedom: 'Human fortune molds and fashions as it wishes: it has made me, who used to be free, into a slave, the lowest position from the highest. I, who had been accustomed to commanding, now obey another's command' (*fortuna humana fingit artatque ut lubet: / me, qui liber fueram, servom fecit, e summo infimum; / qui imperare insueram, nunc alterius imperio obsequor*, 304-306). From the Stoic perspective slavery is an external circumstance, an 'indifferent', but one that must be grappled with in a society with a large, even ubiquitous, population of enslaved people for whom the Stoic perspective on slavery would be cold comfort.

This anxious tension of free and enslaved is at the heart of many of the *Epistulae*. The very beginning of the first letter uses this anxiety to make its point about the proper use of one's time:

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[10] *Ep*. 92.33: *nemo liber est qui corpori servit* ('No one is free who is a slave to the body').

'Make it so, my Lucilius, claim yourself for yourself' (*ita fac, mi Lucili: vindica te tibi*, 1.1). The verb *vindicare* connotes the claim of a free person who has been wrongfully enslaved, and Seneca will go on to assert that the only thing that truly belongs to the individual is their time.[11] But the use of the imperative form tells the reader right as they start reading the *Epistulae* that they have the power to free themselves, their mind and inner self, which no one else can claim from them. 'The mind, at least, is under its own law' (*mens quidem sui iuris*, *Ben*. 3.20.1), Seneca writes as he continues his distinction between physical and mental enslavement.

Still, this distinction is purely theoretical until it begins to account for actual, lived slavery. Seneca attempts to do so in *Ep*. 47. This text is wholly concerned with the dereliction of proper duty and the moral problems posed by the Roman institution of slavery. While not an abolitionist, Seneca here advocates for the humane treatment of enslaved people and uses the excessive appetites of the master as proof of the perverse (and morally unfair) nature of the system.[12]

Enslaved people are relegated to various humiliating tasks as a direct result of their enslavers' appetites and are forced to keep their mouths shut while their masters use their own for overconsumption:

> *Est ille plus quam capit, et ingenti aviditate onerat distentum ventrem ac desuetum iam ventris officio, ut maiore opera omnia egerat quam ingessit. At infelicibus servis movere labra ne in hoc quidem ut loquantur, licet; virga murmur omne compescitur, et ne fortuita quidem verberibus excepta sunt, tussis, sternumenta, singultus; magno malo ulla voce interpellatum silentium luitur; nocte tota ieiuni mutique perstant*. (47.2-3)

> The master eats more than he can digest, and he loads his belly, swollen by his enormous greed and now unfit for the duty of the belly, with the result that it disgorges everything with a greater effort than it ingested it. Conversely, it is not allowed for the unfortunate slaves to move their lips, not even to speak; every murmur is punished by the rod, and not even accidents—coughs, sneezes, hiccups—have been excused

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11 See *OLD* 3; Edwards (2009) for further discussion.

12 Modern scholarship, including, influentially, Griffin (1976) 256-285 tends to celebrate Seneca's liberal attitude toward slavery. For the contrary view, that Seneca advocates for humane treatment of enslaved people out of the masters' self-interest (that is, in order to maintain the institution of slavery), see Bradley (2008). For a more recent treatment of Bradley's argument see Kuhlmann (2012). For a succinct and erudite *status quaestionis*, see Edwards (2019) 178-179.

> from beatings. Silence interrupted by any sound is punished with great harshness; the slaves stand around all night hungry and mute.

The master's belly is *distentus*, a sign of his lack of self-control, as well as a symptom of a diseased *animus* (a correspondence mentioned above). Greed (*aviditas*) is the culprit, a moral failing that leads to an outward sign, the swollen belly. The enslaver's action is highlighted: he eats (*est*) and burdens (*onerat*) such that the belly reneges on its duty of digestion, here called an *officium*. One wonders how far to push a possible pun in *est*, spelled the same (but with a change in the quantity of the vowel) as 'he is'; perhaps the eater not only eats more than he can handle but his very state of being is excessive.

This behavior is naturally contrasted with the lot of the sympathetic enslaved workers, who not only are not permitted to eat, but cannot make noise at all.[13] Seneca strongly suggests that proper treatment of one's enslaved people is an *officium*, one disregarded by the master just as his belly neglects its own duty. The lack of self-control by those with *distenti ventres* is further underscored by a detailed description of the tasks to which the enslaved people are relegated, as they must wipe up the guests' spit and collect their crumbs and vomit:

> *Alia interim crudelia, inhumana praetereo, quod ne tamquam hominibus quidem sed tamquam iumentis abutimur. [quod] Cum ad cenandum discubuimus, alius sputa deterget, alius reliquias temulentorum <toro> subditus colligit.* (47.5)

> I omit other cruel, inhuman tasks in the meantime, because we abuse them not as if they were people, in fact, but as if they were mules. After we have reclined for dining, one slave wipes up the spittle; another, stationed beneath the couch, collects the scraps of the drunken guests.[14]

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[13] The extent to which Seneca is purposely attempting to elicit sympathy for the enslaved people in this text is hotly contested, but Edwards (2019) 179 seems to me to put it well: 'Yet S.'s richly detailed account of the slave's experiences in *Ep.* 47 can work to draw the reader into identification with the slave. The reader, by imagining himself in the position of the real slave, feels the humiliation of his own metaphorical enslavement'. I should note, however, that the notion of the 'real' is always a tricky one!

[14] Bradley (2008) sees these duties as realistic and grounded in the lived experience of enslaved people: 'The details specified could be dismissed as rhetorical exaggeration, except that innumerable items of independent evidence confirm them as realistic' (338).

Seneca develops this contrast between master and slave vis-à-vis silence later in the letter, when he reaffirms that physical punishment is appropriate for animals, but not enslaved people: 'Therefore I judge that you are acting most correctly because you do not want to be feared by your slaves, because you use the punishment of words: mute animals are punished by blows' (*rectissime ergo facere te iudico quod timeri a servis tuis non vis, quod verborum castigatione uteris: verberibus muta admonentur*, 47.19). Here the master's use of words marks him as humane; words, unlike disgorged food, are a positive oral product. Enslaved people and animals are contrasted by their speech faculty: enslaved people can and should speak, as Seneca implies in his discussion of the master's inhumane treatment of them. The fact that they are *muti* is unnatural; here non-human animals are properly *muta*.

Seneca thus uses the gap between the *distentus venter* of the master (and the uncontrolled mouths of his guests) and the silence of the enslaved people as fodder for philosophical criticism of the very idea of slavery. This may seem surprising, considering sociological work on slavery as an institution that emphasizes its effect of 'social death' wherein one's tethers to society at large have been compromised or cut as part of the dehumanization of enslavement (see, influentially, Patterson (1982)). Indeed, we see a socio-political critique in addition to a philosophical one, as it is difficult to divorce *officium*, which at a glance means 'function' or 'role', from its Roman social context, especially considering the sense of agency given to the *venter* which, like the person of whom it is part, has its own *officium*. *Officium* also serves as a Latin translation of Greek *kathēkon*, which the earlier Stoics use to mean 'duty' in a philosophical setting. The master ought to treat his enslaved workers better, Seneca argues throughout this letter, and the *venter* likewise needs to be able to digest, which it cannot do when distended. In other words, the overloaded *venter* cannot be useful for its person (or anyone else). The master is just like his *venter*; as the belly goes, so does the person.[15] This account of the belly's misuse helps Seneca break down the artificial social barriers between slave and free

[15] Seneca also broaches the subject of the master's gustatory appetite (*gula*) in *Ben.* 3.28.4, where he builds his case for a system of social reciprocity (*beneficia*) between enslaver and enslaved based on the arbitrariness of (legal) slavery. See Griffin (2013) 223 for discussion of this section. It is worth noting that *gula*, a word that connotes both the anatomical throat and the appetite more generally, does not seem to have this same sort of *officium*.

status in Roman society—although we would be remiss to momentarily forget that these are barriers from which Seneca the historical figure continually benefits, and scholarly readings that interpret this letter as a sort of pressure valve (such as Bradley) remain compelling.

This refutation of a societal hierarchy of slavery that leads to social death will lead us to the next relevant letter, in which Seneca develops the potential of the stuffed stomach from social death to actual death.

Overeaters are the living dead: *Ep.* 60

Ep. 60 finds Seneca frustrated at the negative emotions that attend public participation at Rome. He begins this letter with a denunciation of the social and political trappings that make up Roman public life: 'I issue a complaint, I litigate, I am angry' (*queror, litigo, irascor*, 60.1) and the complicity of parents and guardians in the maintenance of a system that perpetuates *mala* (in this case the sort of participation in Roman society that will not encourage an individual on the path to Stoic virtue) before moving to a series of questions decrying excess:[16]

> *Quousque poscemus aliquid deos? [quasi] ita nondum ipsi alere nos possumus? Quamdiu sationibus implebimus magnarum urbium campos? quamdiu nobis populus metet? quamdiu unius mensae instrumentum multa navigia et quidem non ex uno mari subvehent? Taurus paucissimorum iugerum pascuo impletur; una silva elephantis pluribus sufficit: homo et terra et mari pascitur. Quid ergo? tam insatiabilem nobis natura alvum dedit, cum tam modica corpora dedisset, ut vastissimorum edacissimorumque animalium aviditatem vinceremus? Minime; quantulum est enim quod naturae datur! Parvo illa dimittitur: non fames nobis ventris nostri magno constat sed ambitio. Hos itaque, ut ait Sallustius, 'ventri oboedientes' animalium loco numeremus, non hominum, quosdam vero ne animalium quidem, sed mortuorum. vivit is qui multis usui est, vivit is qui se utitur; qui vero latitant et torpent sic in domo sunt quomodo in conditivo*. (60.2-4)
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> To what extent can we demand anything of the gods? Can we not yet feed ourselves to this extent? How long will we fill the fields of our great cities with grain? How long will the people reap it for us? How long will many ships carry the substance of one meal—and, in fact, not even from one sea? A bull is satiated with a pasture of very few acres;

[16] For an earlier pillory against Roman public life for its capacity to cause anger, see *Ir.* 3.9.3.

> one forest is enough for many elephants: man feeds on both earth and sea. What then? Has *natura* given us a belly so insatiable (although she had given us bodies so small) so that we might outdo the greed of the hugest and hungriest animals? Not at all—after all, *natura* is satisfied by so very little! She is sent away with just a bit: not the hunger of our belly but *ambitio* costs us greatly. And so let's consider those, as Sallust says, who are 'obedient to the belly' to be among the ranks of the animals, not human beings—and really, certain of them aren't even among the animals, but among the dead. He is alive who can be useful to many people, he is alive who can use himself; indeed, those who hide and grow sluggish in their homes like this might as well be in the tomb.

Human behavior is compared unfavorably to animal behavior, as animals follow *natura* effortlessly. Notably hunger, *fames*, is a natural (that is, created and even felt by *natura*) feeling, unlike *ambitio*, which literally means 'canvassing'. This foreshadows Seneca's claim in *Ep*. 119.14, when he will tell us explicitly that *fames* is not *ambitiosa*. In a Roman political context—the one with which Seneca begins this letter—*ambitio* is the act of 'going around' to canvass for votes or favors, which often involves bribery and is the target of moral reformers such as the elder Cato.[17] Seneca reimagines *ambitio* in light of *fames*, however, as a sort of canvassing of the belly, not for votes but for excessive food culled from excessively distant places. Thus, the political theme endures through this brief letter.

This letter has received attention for its quotation of the historian Sallust, a rarity in Seneca's extant corpus.[18] Seneca pulls this quotation from the first sentence of Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*: 'All men who are eager to distinguish themselves from the other animals ought to strive with the highest might lest they pass their life in silence, like cattle, which nature has made prone and obedient to the belly' (*Omnis homines, qui sese student praestare ceteris animalibus, summa ope niti decet, ne vitam silentio transeant veluti pecora, quae natura prona atque ventri oboedientia finxit*, *BC* 1.1). The mention of bulls and elephants in this letter helps pave the way for the reference.

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[17] Also known as *ambitus* (*OLD* s.v. 6-7); see Cato's speech *De ambitu* (uncertain date), *ORF* XXXIII 136.

[18] By e.g. Berno (2008) 565 n. 61, who links the *venter* to Seneca's discussion of Vatia in *Ep*. 55, and Berno (2017), discussed below.

It is striking that Seneca includes this quotation of Sallust, since in the *EM* Sallust's name comes up only here and in *Ep*. 114, where Seneca discusses him on stylistic grounds and criticizes writers who copy his idiosyncratic style.[19] But in this passage Seneca takes an interest in Sallust's moral viewpoint in a way that he does not when discussing the historian elsewhere: he clearly seeks to appropriate Sallust's idea of nature producing beasts as *ventri oboedientia* (sc. *pecora* in Sallust's text) for his own ends. The Sallustian opening is here recontextualized: Sallust attempts to distinguish man from beast by the desire to achieve greatness and fame, since beasts are silent and care only about eating, but Seneca envisions the habits of beasts as benchmarks for what *natura* intends. That is, if a bull only needs so much, then a human should not require food from both land and sea (*homo et terra et mari pascitur*), let alone in the same meal.

In the clever reading of Berno (2017), Seneca is enacting a 'multiple reference' in this letter, as he criticizes the Epicureanism of the poet Horace through some of this letter's imagery and quotation of Sallust. As Berno writes, '*ventri oboedientes*…operates as a sort of hinge between two themes, that of insatiability (*aviditas*, *ambitio*) and that of wasting one's life, to which Seneca refers by means of the verbs *latito* and *torpeo*' (68). It is this latter observation that I want to expand, although it is worth mentioning that Seneca must intend his reader to also recall Catiline, the famous political conspirator and subject of Sallust's monograph, in this discussion of responsibility and usefulness to society.

Overeating, being 'obedient to the belly', results in dehumanization, as Seneca writes that overeaters should be considered non-human animals. But there is a subclass who are practically corpses. In this passage philosophical themes are entangled with political ones, as the potential to be serviceable (*usui*, 'for the purpose of a use') is a reason to live.[20] Those who are *ventri oboedientes* might as well be dead,

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[19] The only other reference to Sallust in the Senecan corpus is at *Ben*. 4.1.1, where he quotes the Sallustian turn of phrase *cum cura dicendum* (*Hist*. fr. 2. 72 Maurenbrecher = 2.84 McGushin) relatively colorlessly. The Sallustius referred to in *Cl*. 1.10.1 as a familiar of Augustus is Sallust's adopted son. For an argument that Seneca engages with Sallust in the *Q Nat*. as well, see Master (2015).

[20] In an exploration of the semantic range of words that connote fullness in Seneca (and their intertextual relationship with earlier writers, especially Lucretius and Horace), Berno (2008) 556 comments on the usefulness of the Stoic sage ('utilità del saggio') to humanity.

since they are not participating in social exchange and not fulfilling their *officia*. They do not just waste their lives: they are, for all practical purposes, dead, as Seneca claims here.

But there is even more at play. These overeaters are not only animals; they are not only dead; they have become a kind of food. *In conditivo* suggests this transformation, as the adjective *conditivus*, 'preserved' or 'stored', connotes both 'tomb' and 'preserving place' for food. The overconsumer progresses (or regresses) from beast to corpse to food, first stuffed and then preserved.[21]

Notably neither non-human animal nor corpse nor food item can speak, and it is here that we can further unfold *Ep*. 47. 47's contrast between enslaver and enslaved is primarily achieved through the faculty of the mouth, what goes in and comes out, words and food bits alike. In the first sentence of the *BC* all people who want to differentiate themselves from animals need to avoid living their life *silentio*, in silence. But the enslaved people in 47 have no choice but to live their life in silence, since even involuntary noises like sneezes, coughs, and hiccups are cause for punishment. Thus they need to exercise a self-control unknown to the free people in this letter: the master, who continuously gorges himself, and the guests, whose mouth-products—spit, vomit, and crumbs—they have to clean up. Not only do the enslaved people come closer to the Stoic ideal of *sōphrosynē*, self-control or moderation, but with *Ep*. 60 adduced we now see that they do so through a Senecan gloss on Sallust.[22] Sometimes silence is unavoidable—there are other, non-Sallustian ways for people to distinguish themselves, such as, in this case, through a lack of excessive consumption in the manner of virtuous *exempla* such as Manius Curius Dentatus. In other words, the notion of the enslaved as socially dead is transferred to the enslavers, who cannot be useful to anyone because of their excessive appetites.

So the overeaters are already stuffed and fit to be preserved for a future meal. Seneca will once again dredge up their swollen corpses in *Ep*. 122, near the end of the collection as we have it.

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[21] Not remarked upon by Berno (2017), though she collocates a number of Senecan *loci* where people are fattened up (69, n. 66-67), including *Ep*. 122, discussed below. For the etymologically and thematically related concepts of *condimenta* and *conditurae* ('condiments', from a different but related verb *condio*, 'I season') in Seneca, see Courtil (2018).

[22] For a wide-ranging discussion of the paradoxes of the free/slave dichotomy in Seneca's letters, see Edwards (2009).

Stuffed bellies and stuffed birds: *Ep.* 122

Ep. 122 levies a vigorous critique against an apparent trend in Seneca's day: staying awake all night and sleeping all day. This lifestyle, popular amongst a group of people Seneca calls the *turba lucifugarum*, 'crowd of light-shunners', is very much a reversal of custom, not to mention of the order prescribed by *natura*, and Torre (1997) has (rightly in my view) taken this letter as a springboard for an investigation into the relationship between banquets and *luxuria*. Seneca herein tells anecdotes of people who attempt to perfectly invert the day by, for example, conducting business at night (including punishing their enslaved workers) and eating dinner at daybreak (122.15-16). The *natura*-sanctioned order of the day and night is called an *officium* at the beginning of the letter: 'There are those who invert the functions of the light and night' (*sunt qui officia lucis noctisque perverterint*, 122.2).[23] Such a lifestyle impacts a person negatively, as according to Seneca the resulting lack of sunlight makes them resemble pale, fattened birds:

> *aves quae conviviis comparantur, ut inmotae facile pinguescant, in obscuro continentur; ita sine ulla exercitatione iacentibus tumor pigrum corpus invadit et †superba umbra† iners sagina subcrescit. at istorum corpora qui se tenebris dicaverunt foeda visuntur, quippe suspectior illis quam morbo pallentibus color est: languidi et evanidi albent, et in vivis caro morticina est.* (122.4)
>
> Birds that are prepared for banquets, immobile so that they may easily grow fat, are kept in darkness; thus for those lying without any exercise swelling overtakes their sluggish body and in their arrogant darkness lazy fat grows up in them. But the bodies of those who have dedicated themselves to the darkness seem disgusting, indeed their complexion is more dubious than that of those pallid from sickness; they are pale, languid, and fading away—there is dead flesh in those living people.

These *antipodes*, people who invert the day's natural order, are not only paradoxically both living and dead (*in vivis caro morticina est*), but, like fattened birds, they are more fit to be eaten than to eat.[24] Their

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[23] For these *officia* as sanctioned by *natura* see Inwood (2007b) 347-348.

[24] Summers (1910) 352 dryly notes 'The birds are improved by all this: not so human beings'.

bloating, pallor, and overall corpse-like constitution comport with the symptoms of disease experienced by the excessive eater that Seneca had laid out earlier in the *Epistulae* (95.16):

> *Inde pallor et nervorum vino madentium tremor et miserabilior ex cruditatibus quam ex fame macies; inde incerti labantium pedes et semper qualis in ipsa ebrietate titubatio; inde in totam cutem umor admissus distentusque venter dum male adsuescit plus capere quam poterat; inde suffusio luridae bilis et decolor vultus tabesque †in se† putrescentium et retorridi digiti articulis obrigescentibus nervorumque sine sensu iacentium torpor aut palpitatio [corporum] sine intermissione vibrantium*. (95.16)
>
> Then there is pallor and a shaking of muscles dripping with wine, and a thinness, more wretched from indigestion than from hunger; then the feet are unsure in their tottering and there is always a stagger, like the one in drunkenness itself; then a moistness sent through all the skin and a belly swollen while it has the bad custom of taking in more than it can; then a suffusion of sallow bile and loss of color from the face and rotting of parts putrefying among themselves and wrinkled fingers with their joints hardening and numbness of nerves lying without feeling, or palpitation of body parts quivering without interruption.

This *comparandum* helps flesh out the relationship between 47, 60, and 122, particularly since the *venter* is not mentioned by name in this stuffed-bird passage. The *distentus venter* links the master in 47 with the bodily afflictions of the excessive eater; in addition, both eat 'more than they can take in' (*plus capere quam poterat* in this case, *plus quam capit* in 47). Here the distended belly is one of many symptoms of the breakdown of the body, its inability to function properly.[25] Notably the symptoms described in 95, the putrefaction of various body parts, remind the reader of corpses. In this respect we might think of 95 as the immediate prelude to 122, the eaters' symptoms representing the last of their humanity.

The eaters in 122 are, like those in *Ep*. 60, also compared both to non-human animals and corpses; the notion of birds kept in darkness reminds us of the *conditivum*, both tomb and preserving place for food. The stuffed birds underline that Senecan conceptions of how people

[25] For wider context for this passage and its connection with a gendered theory of medicine, see Gazzarri (2014), who makes the point that 'vomiting of food replaces the act of giving birth' (214) for the women whom Seneca describes shortly after this passage.

interrelate, engage with each other, and discharge their social obligations in a healthy society are continually illustrated through swollen bodies, which Seneca sees as useless from both a philosophical and a social standpoint. Moreover, since he refers to the proper roles of day and night as *officia* the *antipodes* are, just as the enslaver's stomach in 47, in violation of their natural duty.

As scholars such as Torre (1997) 391-396 and Berno (2023) 153-156 have pointed out, these bloated bodies are a component of a much larger picture of inversion, the extent to which *luxuria*, humanity's desire for luxury, fights against *natura*. But the fact that the eaters have become the eaten is worth dwelling on, in particular for what this bird-human meal, living people who paradoxically contain dead flesh, says about the social experience of the banquet (*convivium*). The *convivium* is, of course, supposed to be a celebration of community, its etymological meaning 'living together' not a dead metaphor at Rome but an active consideration.[26] So the banquet, itself a frequent target of Seneca for its staging of luxury,[27] is inverted on a level as fundamental as the verbal, not a 'living together' but a 'dying together'. In this way Seneca builds on an image promoted by his younger Stoic contemporary Persius, who imagines a diner eating himself to death (*S*. 3.88-106.) The banquet as a place of hyperbolic overstuffing receives a modern treatment in the 1973 film *La Grande Bouffe* (dir. Marco Ferreri), where a group of bored bourgeoisie retire to a villa to stuff themselves until they die. These latter two comparanda, as full-throated satire, differ from Seneca's account of overstuffed bellies in both context and message, since as part of his Stoic education Seneca actively seeks to dissuade his reader from such a social death, not just criticize it; Persius famously tells the reader in his first satire that he wants to be read by a self-selecting group and does not much care how large it is.

Notably, the *antipodes* in this letter are part of not only a theoretical or historicized discussion—as Seneca mentions various Tiberian figures associated with this lifestyle—but one rooted in contemporary society. Petronius and Nero both lurk in the background. Scholars including, famously, Sullivan (1968) 465, influenced by Tacitus' portrait

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[26] Famously in Cicero (*Fam*. 9.24.3), who remarks that for the Romans banquets are not Greek-styled *symposia* or *syndeipna*, 'drinkings together' or 'eatings together'.

[27] In addition to the focused discussion of Torre (1997), see Berno (2021) and Gazzarri (2021).

of Petronius, have argued that Nero's *arbiter elegantiae* was a member of the *turba lucifugarum* criticized by Seneca in this letter. The Neronian connection is strong, too, because of Nero's penchant for hosting banquets lasting from noon to midnight.[28] But we should understand any possible criticism of Nero in a wider textual context, since Seneca elsewhere attacks novel ways of eating that other ancient sources tell us were patented by Nero, the most readily available example being Seneca's long castigation of the practice of putting snow into drinks.[29] In this locus (*Q Nat.* 4b.13.10-11) we see language of stuffing: 'As long as the stomach is sound and able to take in healthy food and is filled, not pressed, it is content with the remedies of *natura*' (*quamdiu sanus et salubris cibi capax stomachus est impleturque, non premitur, naturalibus fomentis contentus est*). *Premitur* does the same sort of work as the adjective *distentus*. This criticism of such an innovation can help form part of the Seneca-Nero puzzle, namely the question of how Seneca manages to safely address Nero in a coded way within his later texts. Nero maintains an absent presence as an innovator of gustatory luxury in *Ep*. 122, revealed through the various culinary novelties with which he (and his courtier Petronius) is associated here and elsewhere. The preeminent social butterfly in contemporary Rome, along with his *arbiter elegantiae*, ironically abets the societal uselessness of the stuffed corpse.

One more reference to this snowy passage will confirm its connection with the misuse of the stomach. In the penultimate sentence of the book (4b.13.11), Seneca writes: 'Therefore that snow, in which you're now even swimming, has come to the point, through the use and daily slavery of the stomach, that it takes the place of water' (*Itaque nix ista, in qua iam etiam natatis, eo pervenit usu et cotidiana stomachi servitute, ut aquae locum obtineat*). Absent some specific verbal correspondences (*venter* in particular), the 'slavery of the stomach' cannot help but bring to mind the extremeness of the evolution from slavery to overfullness to the banqueter being treated *as* food.

Two letters removed from the end of the *Epistulae* as they have survived—we know from Gellius (12.2.3) that Seneca wrote at least two more books—the transformation of the overeaters is complete: from stuffing the belly to being preserved and served up like fattened birds.

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[28] Suet. *Ner.* 27.2; for modern discussion see Berno (2023) 156.

[29] Plin. *HN*. 31.40; see Berno (2023) 158-159, 198-199.

This gradual metamorphosis, the result of individual (and politically and societally sanctioned) misidentification of the *officium* of the belly, is key to Seneca's own education of his reader in the ways in which they can navigate the social demands of Roman society without falling victim to trends that encourage the body's misuse.[30]

In closing I do want to emphasize that Seneca imputes no wrongdoing to the *venter* itself, which is part of the *natura*-designed body and thus, when used correctly, fulfills its *officium* of proper digestion. It is the misuse of the stomach that is at issue, a negligence that Seneca sees as culturally widespread and antecedent to the sort of slavery to appetites that he attacks in the letters discussed in this article. Fortunately, with his own letters Seneca provides the reader a source of nourishment from which they can never be overfull: a Stoic education that is easy to digest.[31]

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[30] *Pace* Berno (2023), who claims that Seneca feels envy toward the *antipodes* for the supposed freedom of their lifestyle (155-156).

[31] For the theme of Seneca's *EM* as 'spiritual nourishment', see, e.g., Von Albrecht (2004) 80 and passim, Star (2012) 183-189, Graver (2014).

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