

Senecan Progressor Friendship and the Characterization of Nero in Tacitus' *Annals*

In the *Annals*, Tacitus presents the Roman emperors within a web of social relations. Each has a particular interactive pattern, which includes typical behaviors and a set of primary interactants. Showing how the emperor relates to others is a device of characterization and evaluation.¹ Even solipsistic Tiberius is shaped by his interactions with people close to him.² Claudius becomes a puppet at the hands of his wives and freedmen, unable to think or feel something without being told (12.3.2). Nero appears as a pawn in a power struggle between his mother and courtiers (13.2.1-2), and similar to Tiberius, he "erupts into an orgy of crime and ignomy alike" (6.51.3) with the weakening and removal of such authorities and the concomitant introduction of new associates.

In his own writings, Seneca, one of the key interactants in Tacitus' portrait of Nero, attributes considerable importance to social interaction for developing and expressing a person's character. For him, this was not just a matter of navel-gazing "care of the self" but a political ideal: Seneca proposes models for a new aristocracy of moral accomplishment, or at least an answer to real socio-political issues from a Stoic point of view that involved a radical redefinition of traditional values.³ Tacitus knew the work of Seneca, the most prominent author of his time, and had an opinion on his philosophy.⁴ For him, too, literature was a form of activism. His historiography is *Thesenliteratur* (Heldmann 2011) that makes a case for values and recommendable behavior and sets out models or anti-models of aristocratic conduct.⁵ One such model is Thrasea Paetus, a Stoic like Seneca and someone whom Tacitus honors as "virtue itself" (16.21.1). Even though the two men never interact directly in the *Annals*, Tacitus includes signs of

1 See, e.g., Baar 1990, 110-145 and Geiser 2007, 90-117, 273-274. Geiser 2007 and Daitz 1960 discuss characterization by contrast, Ash 1999 by interaction with groups.

2 See 6.51.3 with Kraus and Woodman 1997, 103-105. Citations by number refer to the *Annals*. Translations are those of Yardley 2008.

3 See in particular Habinek 1998 and Roller 2001.

4 12.8.2; 13.3.1; 15.63.3, 67.3; Cass. Dio 62.25.2; Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.125; Trillitzsch 1971, 61-68 and 75-98. Allusions have been noted especially in the resignation scene at 14.53-56 (Brinkmann 2002, 25-35 and 45-46; Ker 2009, 47-49; Griffin 2013, 83-87). According to Woodman 2010, Tacitus avoids stylistic echoes in that passage, but that would also require knowledge of what is to be avoided. For O'Gorman 2000 and Ker 2012, 306, "Seneca's status as a writer" is "central to Tacitus' portrayal". On Tacitus and Seneca, see also, e.g., Ker 2009; Turpin 2008; Rilinger 1996; Griffin 1992; Abel 1991; Seita 1982; Fabbri 1978-1979; Henry and Walker 1963; Syme 1958, vol. 2, 550-554; Ryberg 1942; Dürr 1940. Schmal 2008 and Dyson 1970 read Tacitus as a critic of Seneca.

5 See, e.g., also Vielberg 1987; Turpin 2008; Kapust 2011.

mutual respect.⁶ This is evidence that Tacitus himself conceived of nobility at least also in terms of moral excellence and that he was not indifferent to the ideologies on which famous proponents of political virtue had grounded their behavior. We may therefore expect him to engage with Seneca's philosophy when presenting that man in his narrative. Here, I wish to explore one aspect of this engagement: how the interactive patterns that structure Tacitus' portrayal of Nero may have been influenced by a conception of philosopher friendship that Seneca develops in his *Epistulae morales*.

In a passage not yet fully acknowledged for its theoretical importance, Seneca gives an idiosyncratic definition of progressor friendship, which is a conceptual innovation. It combines the *philia* of Stoic sages with traits of Stoic *erōs*, the love of a sage for a young talented fool. In the full traditional Stoic sense of these terms, *philia* and *erōs* are virtuous activities and dispositions exclusively of sages, while all others are each other's enemies and incapable of maintaining a loving relationship. Contrary to this, Seneca's new type of friendship is not just a deficient approximation to an unattainable ideal, but true friendship of its own kind. Even fools can practice it in its fullest sense, and it is well adapted to the values and social contexts of Roman elite life. This friendship comes about "when equal volition pulls minds into a partnership of desiring what is honorable". Progressor friends know "that they have everything in common, and even more so their problems".⁷ The Stoic definition of friendship as "consonance" (*sumphōnia*), which consists in "having the same beliefs about the things in life" and "the knowledge of common goods",⁸ applies only to sages since only sages have proper knowledge, real goods, and the agreement (*homologia*) required for consonance with oneself or others. By replacing "the same beliefs" and "knowledge" in the standard definition with equal *volition* and substituting the common *possession* of goods, i.e. honorable things, (a) with the shared *desire* for what is honorable and (b) with the friends' awareness that they share their shortcomings (*aduersa*), Seneca proposes a definition under which progressors may fall. These are persons who strive to become better men but are well aware how far they are still removed from virtue. The mutual attraction consists in the commitment observed in the other and the signs of the other's progress. While the Stoic sage falls in love with a youth that displays an exceptional "bloom of virtue" and thus signs that, later, he may become a sage himself,⁹ the progressor seeks the friendship of another in whom he recognizes the same urge and talent for achieving virtue. The two impulses, the quasi-erotic desire directed at moral talent and the strong desire to realize

6 See 15.23.4 and below, p. 4, on Thrasea's imitation of Seneca's death.

7 Sen. *Epist.* 6.3 [...] *cum animos in societatem honesta cupiendi par uoluntas trahit. Quidni non possit? sciunt enim ipsos omnia habere communia, et quidem magis aduersa*. My debts to other scholars are acknowledged in a forthcoming more detailed account.

8 Stob. 2.7.11k, p. 106,13-7; 2.7.5l, p. 74,3-5; 2.7.11b, p. 94,1-6 Wachsmuth; Cic. *Lael.* 21.

9 Diog. Laert. 7.130; Stob. 2.7.11s, vol. 2, p. 115 Wachsmuth; Plut. *Comm. not.* = *Mor.* 1073b; Cic. *Tusc.* 4.72.

that talent by both making and becoming virtuous oneself, interlink to forge a close bond of orientation toward what is honorable and thus truly good.

With this dogmatic move, Seneca opens the practice of true friendship in a full and rigidly defined Stoic sense to every person committed to self-improvement and assimilates it to social practices of his times. Philosophy becomes as advice. Friends confer about the best course of action as if attending the traditional *concilium amicorum*. They make sick visits, share meals, read each other's books, and debate tenets of different schools in learned conversations or letters. There is room for ambition, and hierarchies are observed, yet hedged in by the reciprocity of efforts and by the fact that both services rendered and the difference in hierarchy itself are defined not by birth or material means but by the degree of moral progress. The more advanced friend is an advisor and role model, and since there is usually a concomitant difference in age, the didactic aspect of it is cast in terms of traditional, and thus less offensive, mentorship. It is a hierarchy of respect, not of power.¹⁰

Since Seneca's progressor friendship was similar to ordinary practices and since he did not provide a systematic exposition of it, at least not in the extant works, it may be argued that Tacitus would not have paid attention to such theoretical subtleties. However, my thesis does not rest on the assumption that Tacitus remembered the precise words of *Epist.* 6.3 or that he understood their dogmatic importance (see however p. 11). I only assume that like any perceptive reader Tacitus had noticed that Seneca's masterpiece, the *Epistulae morales*, enact a distinct kind of friendship identifiable by these features: (1) It is a form of learning and development. Friends benefit each other by mutual exhortation and example. Usually, a younger friend seeks out a more advanced partner as role model and advisor. (2) Friends are selected according to their ability – and this means most of all their determination – to achieve self-improvement. (3) Most importantly, although this type of friendship is part of everyday life and concerned with everyday affairs, there is one general overarching aim: *honestum*, to become a better and finally a good person in the proper and strict Stoic sense of the word. Virtue is not only a feature for which one selects a friend; it is the very point and purpose of the friendship.

It is therefore likely that Tacitus knew Senecan progressor friendship at least well enough to distinguish it from other forms. Further evidence can be gleaned from Seneca's famous death scene,¹¹ which is reminiscent of the progressor friendship

10 Griffin 2013, 32–34, 71: *amicus uenerandus*, not *potens*.

11 Extensive recent discussions are Ker 2009, B. Zimmermann 2008, and Brinkmann 2002, 91-154, each with thorough reviews of previous scholarship, of the reception of this cultural icon, and of parallels in Seneca's own writings. In contrast to Schmal 2008, who reads the scene as a persiflage intended to debunk the philosopher's pathos, B. Zimmermann 2005 highlights its role in a tradition of transmitting Stoic ideas through *exempla*. On the charge of vanity often raised in discussions of this scene, see, e.g., Brinkmann 2002, 119-123; Woodman 1998, 205-206; Griffin 1992, 368, 443

advocated in the *Epistulae morales* in several respects. When the soldiers come to Seneca's house, he is dining with his wife and two friends.¹² For a man of Seneca's standing, the party is remarkably small, even if we take into account his retirement and the fact that he is making a stop on his way back from Campania.¹³ Second, as transpires from the way in which Seneca talks to them, the friends practice philosophy like him and prepare themselves against future blows of Fortune with systematic reflection (*ratio*). They appear less advanced than Seneca, shedding tears while he admonishes them to remember the "precepts of wisdom" and the "rational method" they have been studying for so long (15.62.2.). Third, Seneca himself is not a perfect sage either: his care for his much beloved wife threatens to weaken his resolve. Aware of his own deficiency – such awareness being an essential prerequisite for self-improvement (e.g. Sen. *Epist.* 6.1; 28.9-10) – he arranges for them to be separated (15.63.1). A fourth feature of Stoic friendship, the priority of the mind in comparison to material exchanges, characterizes Seneca's reward for his faithful friends (15.62.1). Since he is not permitted to show his gratitude in his testament, he offers an immaterial gift,¹⁴ "the image of his life" (15.62.1), in whose remembrance love for a friend and love for virtue interlace just like the desires that constitute a progressor friendship. Seneca calls it the most beautiful thing he can share (*pulcherrimum*), an expression that points to *kalon* ("beautiful-honorable"), the Greek equivalent to Latin *honestum*. Remembering and contemplating this "image" will advance his friends in the "good arts" (*bonae artes*), i.e. philosophy as well as the virtuous character that one acquires through philosophy.

A comparison with the death scene of another Stoic, Thrasea Paetus, demonstrates the degree to which Seneca's is designed as an instantiation of progressor friendship. Tacitus shaped the two death scenes as foils to each other,¹⁵ with Thrasea imitating Seneca.¹⁶ Both engage in philosophical reflection, and both follow the example of Socrates – Seneca by drinking hemlock and admonishing his friends; Thrasea by "examining the nature of the soul and the separation of the spirit and the body" (16.34.1). Both offer their own blood as a libation to Jupiter Liberator and present themselves as examples.¹⁷ The *Annals* break off at this point, but we can still glean that Thrasea, like Seneca before him, bravely bears the protracted pain of a slow death (16.35.2). However, there are significant differences. Whereas Seneca focuses on one type of interaction, that of a progressor friend, Thrasea maintains several types of social relations simultaneously and is a public figure surrounded by a crowd of noble

12 15.60.4. On their identity, see Syme 1958, vol. 1, 300 and Griffin 1992, 371.

13 14.56.3; 15.45.3; 15.60.4. Compare Sen. *Epist.* 87.2.

14 This he had recommended, e.g., in Sen. *Ben.* 2.22-25; 2.30-35; 6.29.2-6.35.1; 7.13-16.

15 Ker 2009, 60-61; Schmal 2008, 116; Brinkmann 2002, 126-130

16 E.g. Opelt 1984, 45; Griffin 1992, 368 and 370.

17 For Thrasea, see 16.35.1; Sailor 2008, 14-16 argues that both perform a *devotio*.

visitors.¹⁸ While Seneca treats his wife like a fellow philosopher, Thrasea reminds his wife of her role as a mother (34.2). Philosophy appears in the conventional manner: the Roman aristocrat discusses theoretical questions with a Greek professional (34.1 *Demetrius Cynicae institutionis doctore*). His final gesture (16.35.1) is not directed at yet another type of interactant. The *quaestor* who brings Thrasea the death warrant represents Rome's future generations. These differences between the parallel scenes highlight the idiosyncratic unity and narrow focus of Seneca's social practice.

The same narrow focus is conveyed by the information that Tacitus selects to impart about Seneca in the extant narrative of the *Annals*.¹⁹ Seneca appears as a prominent intellectual, a proponent of "good arts" and, most importantly, as a *combination* of teacher²⁰ and friend of the emperor (*amicus principis*).²¹ Both of these functions are combined in the juncture *honesta comitas* ("principled cordiality") with which Tacitus describes how Seneca exerted influence at Nero's court (13.2.1). The adjective *honesta* evokes Seneca's identity as a philosopher and conveys the dignity of a role model since it indicates that Seneca tempered his affability with a strict sense of decorum, while *comitas* is a term used for social superiors. Whatever the actual impact that Seneca may have had on the government of the empire,²² there is certainly a tendency in the *Annals* to de-emphasize Seneca's role as a statesman. Tacitus tells us nothing about his role in Nero's accession; he never appears as an advisor in matters of government, let alone as a speaker in the Senate, even though he was a senator in the rank of a former consul and must have attended Senate meetings. On the basis of Tacitus' account of the years 62-65 CE, one wonders how Seneca could maintain the amount of influence he still appears to have after his fall, to the degree that he could even be considered as a candidate for the emperorship.²³ It is only at Seneca's downfall that we are offered a short glimpse of the influential public figure receiving throngs of visitors and parading in the streets of Rome with a large retinue. And even then, the throngs of clients whom Seneca dismisses when he gives up "the routine associated with this former power"²⁴ are

18 A more detailed analysis in Wildberger 2014.

19 Seneca's relegation to Corsica was surely mentioned in the lost books (Ker 2012, 310).

20 12.8.2 *magister*, also in 13.6.2 to enhance Nero's immaturity and dependence on others and in 14.52.4 to criticize the relationship as inadequate for the now adult emperor; cf. 13.14.3 *professoria lingua*. Reference to Seneca's "precepts" is made in 13.2.1; 13.11.2; 13.42.4; 14.55.3; Seneca calls himself *educator* and *praeceptor* (15.62.2).

21 He is called *amicus* in the retreat dialogue (14.54.1 and 56.2) and included in general references to Nero's friends: 13.6.4; 13.12.2 *senioribus ... amicis* (also 14.54.3); 13.13.3 *proximi amicorum*; 13.18.1; 14.10.2; 13.42.4 *regia amicitia*. See Griffin 1992, 67-68, 76-103.

22 The most detailed discussion of this question is Griffin 1992, in particular 67-128.

23 15.65; compare also 14.52.2 *studia civium*; Brinkmann 2002, 88 with further references.

24 14.56.3 *instituta prioris potentiae*; transl. Yardley 2008 altered.

presented as a symbol rather than as a source of his power, which must have derived to a large extent from lavish patronage and the glamorous self-representation of a well connected court politician with a strong and strategically placed followership of his own.²⁵ In the *Annals*, Seneca is someone who, like a Senecan progressor friend, has nothing else with which he could impress others than his words²⁶ and moral authority. Whatever the historical truth of the matter, Tacitus' Seneca seems to know only one form of political agency: to influence the character or behavior of Nero himself.²⁷

A similar selectivity can be observed in what Tacitus chooses to tell us about the interactions between Seneca and Nero. Similar to the younger partner in a progressor friendship, Nero is frequently described as a learner. In contrast to Tiberius and Claudius, and even to the princes Germanics and Drusus,²⁸ he is seen as someone who still has to be shaped. His mother acts for him without his knowledge and against his wishes (13.1.1, 3). The people in Rome doubt whether the boy will be up to his task (13.1.1; 13.6.2). Seneca and Burrus are tutors and advisors of the young emperor (13.2.1) and, according to the discussions reported by Tacitus, perceived as such by the public (13.6.3-4).²⁹ The Senate hopes to motivate his "young mind" with praise (13.11.1). Poppaea ridicules Nero's position by calling him a ward in charge of others (14.1.1 *pupillus*), while employing her own "arts of an adulteress" (14.1.3) to shape his emotions (13.46; 14.1). When courtiers advise Nero to distance himself from his schoolmaster Seneca, they suggest Nero's exemplary ancestors as alternative instructors (14.52.4). Instead of waiting for the emperor's orders, Tigellinus begins to devise a program of murders for him (14.57.1). In Suetonius, Seneca is a professor of rhetoric, and Agrippina actively "turned Nero away from philosophy, admonishing him that it was damaging for someone about to become emperor" (*Nero* 52). There is no such conflict in the *Annals*. Nor is Tacitus' Seneca just the man of power politics and teacher of whatever Nero needs to stay in power or enjoy his pastimes described by Cassius Dio.³⁰ The emerging picture is far more consistent in its blend of educational measures and pragmatic support given by a loyal friend. When Agrippina summons Seneca to the court, she intends him to serve both as an instructor (*magister*) to guide Nero to manhood and as a political advisor to help them with "their imperial aspirations" (12.8.2), and the later conflict with Agrippina appears as a struggle for control of Nero's

25 See, e.g., Syme 1958, vol. 2, 552 and 591-592; Griffin 1992, 80-96.

26 12.8.2; 13.3.1; 14.52.3-4.

27 Griffin 1992, 67-68: "In Tacitus he is always referred to as Nero's *amicus* or *magister*." See also Dürr 1940, 45, 49 and O'Gorman 2000, 148, both contradicting Syme 1958, vol. 1, 333 (also vol. 2, 552; Abel 1991, 3171).

28 Seianus accompanies Drusus as *rector iuueni* (1.24.2), but Drusus is a budding statesman himself and uses opportunities to demonstrate his aptitude (e.g. 1.29.1; 2.44.1; 3.31.2).

29 See also O'Gorman 2000, 147-148, 150, 151.

30 See, e.g., 61.3.1; 61.20.3; 62.24.1. Griffin 1992, 68-73 warns us to take Dio's description of Seneca's political activity at face value. See also the overview in Too 1994, 212.

adolescent mind rather than a clash of policies. Political advice becomes moral education: Nero's policies, as they are expressed in his speeches to the Senate written by Seneca, can be described as the result of "honorable precepts".³¹

Nero, too, casts Seneca in the role of an advisor and not only a teacher of rhetoric, when he refers Seneca's services with the phrase *ratio consilio praeceptis* (14.55.3). Both compare Seneca to Augustus' friends Maecenas and Agrippa (53.3; 55.2). When Nero declares that Seneca's gifts are more lasting than the material benefits Seneca had received himself (55.4), he must refer to an intellectual or moral benefit that goes beyond practical advice in a particular situation. Such an understanding is supported by the clause "as long as my life goes on" (55.4) with which Nero underscores the duration of Seneca's gifts. It is to Seneca as a moral advisor that he turns with the request (56.1) to call him to order (*reuocas*) and guide (*regis*) him, "if" his "youthful unsteadiness goes awry at some point". The generalizing phrase "at some point" (*qua in parte*) implies a wide range of contexts in which Nero could stray and go wrong, while the imagery of steering and losing one's balance on slippery ground (*lubricum*) points to behavior involving lack of emotional control.³² The phrase corresponds closely to an earlier description of the role that Burrus and Seneca assume after Nero's accession. They act as "guides to the emperor's youth" (*rectores imperatoriae iuventae*) and their common aim is to "confine the unsteady (*lubricam*) age of the emperor", or – if that were possible – lead him to moral excellence (*uirtutem*).

After this evidence that Tacitus assimilates the relation of Nero and Seneca to a progressor friendship, I now wish to present a number of inversions to which he submits the model in his account of Nero's reign. The first of these inversions is the fact that neither sought the friendship of the other; the relationship was imposed on them by Agrippina. There is no hint that Seneca had a particular liking or respect for his student, while Tacitus explicitly mentions Nero's hatred toward Seneca,³³ an emotion that in its intensity is only partly explained by the incriminations of Seneca's enemies at court. Since Tacitus enhances Seneca's affability, tact, and verbal grace, and presents him as loyal and serviceable, the emperor's strong antipathy appears groundless. Rather, we learn, Nero "was turning more toward worse characters" (14.52.1) and, as transpires from the accusations levelled at Seneca by such individuals, resented the fact that someone should be superior to him and tell him what to do (14.52.2-3). In short, Nero hated exactly that which should motivate a younger person to enter a progressor friendship: the acquisition of virtue through constant exposure to the educative efforts of a better man.

31 13.11.2 *quam honesta praeciperet*; see Abel 1985, 671 and 15.62.2 *praecepta sapientiae*.

32 See, e.g., Sen. *Epist.* 71.28; 75.10; 116.6; *Dial.* 3.7.4.

33 14.56.3; 15.56.2; 15.64.1. Attempts to murder Seneca: 15.45.3; 15.60.2

This difference is accompanied, second, by a mismatch of the goals pursued with the relationship. Agrippina started it to bring Nero on the throne, and Seneca is rewarded with honors and material benefits. From that perspective, the aim that binds the “friends” together is not the quest for what is honorable, but the acquisition of power and wealth. However, when Seneca’s own intentions are expressed for the first time, as he becomes visible as an active player in this game, Tacitus ascribes a different motivation to him. *He* has the aims of a progressor friend and wishes to lead Nero to virtue or at least restrain his vices (13.2.1).

Third, a true philosopher’s words were supposed to agree between with his thought and deeds, while in the relationship of Seneca and Nero, deeds and thoughts are replaced with words. The words which Seneca puts in Nero’s mouth as a teacher and ghostwriter do not change Nero’s mind. At his first public speech, the laudation at Claudius’ funeral, Tacitus has the audience comment that Nero was the first emperor to have his speeches written by someone else and complements this with his own history of previous emperors’ rhetorical skills (13.3.2). This leads the reader to infer that the inaugural address to the Senate (13.4) was also written by Seneca. A little later, Tacitus reinforces this impression by indicating that Nero’s ghostwriter tries to promote the emperor’s clemency by having Nero bind himself (*obstringens*) to such a policy in frequent speeches (13.11.2). It is a moot question to which extent Seneca actually determined events during the first years of Nero’s reign (see p. 5), and Tacitus does point to real consequences that ensue (13.5.1 *nec defuit fides*): the Senate is allowed to make some independent decisions, and Nero appoints the right person to manage the Armenian affair. Interestingly, however, every time that Tacitus makes *explicit* reference to Seneca’s authorship, the speech is characterized as a failure: the funeral oration for Claudius provokes laughter (13.3.1); the letter to the Senate explaining Agrippina’s death is an inept confession (14.11.3); Nero’s protestations of clemency are just a spectacle (13.11.2). Even though he acknowledges changes to the better at the beginning of Nero’s reign, Tacitus creates an overall impression of futility. When he has Nero promise clemency – the very virtue about which Seneca wrote his mirror of princes – Seneca indulges his own vanity, says to Tacitus, whether the flaunted achievement was to be “the nobility of his instruction (*quam honesta praeciperet*)” or his literary talent (13.11.2). In all these instances, the failure of words reveals the insincerity of what has been said. Seneca does not believe that Claudius is praiseworthy or Nero innocent of matricide; for Nero the speeches to the Senate are just words and do not imply any commitment on his part. The verb *obstringere* at 13.11.2 is used with sarcastic irony; otherwise the repeated affirmations would not have been a sign of Seneca’s vanity, as Tacitus presents them, but a laudable and efficient life-saving measure. When we finally encounter Nero as the author of his own speech, we observe a similar disconnect of words and thoughts. “The overall impression is of a Seneca-Nero dyad tightly bound by insincere expressions of gratitude”,³⁴ while Nero repeats

34 Ker 2012, 323, see also O’Gorman 2000, 146-161; Abel 1991, 3162.

“terms and phrases” from Seneca’s speech “in order to use them in a completely different sense against the philosopher”.³⁵ Again, Tacitus makes it perfectly clear that Nero does not mean what he says and that he is relying not so much on Seneca’s instruction but rather on his own natural and well-trained talent for “cloaking his hatred with treacherous flattery” (14.56.3). The scene also clarifies in which sense Nero is unable to internalize Seneca’s instructions. He is not interested in the subject matter, the philosophical or political ideas that the other wishes to communicate, but perfectly able (13.3.3) and willing to show verbal artistry if it suits his purposes. Progressor friends strive to change each other’s mind; Seneca only succeeds in supplying empty words. Nero’s *mind* speaks a different language.

A consequence of this is a forth inversion: of the hortatory role performed by the more advanced friend. Progressor friends propel each other forward, urging the other to make quicker progress (e.g. Sen. *Epist.* 34.2). Since Nero lacks any inclination toward virtue, exhortation is replaced by attempts at restraining the other, and even this does not happen in the form of open rebuke, which Seneca uses when speaking to his progressor friends in the death scene (15.62.2). In the case of Nero, the only possible hortatory mode is concession and thus opting for the lesser evil.³⁶ That Tacitus frames the relationship in terms of an effort toward moral progress all the same becomes evident when he has Seneca refer to his frankness (*libertas*) toward Nero and to the fact that he was not given to flattery (15.61.1). Since the words are directed at Nero himself, to whom a lie would have been pointless, they show that indulgence was a necessity and not a sign that Seneca had willingly forsaken his role as educator and honest friend.

Rather, he was constrained by the asymmetrical division of power which constitutes a fifth inversion of the model. Whereas social hierarchy and moral superiority tend to coincide in Seneca’s descriptions of progressor friends, as emperor Nero ranks so far above Seneca that age and moral superiority could not compensate the difference even if Nero *had* accepted moral superiority as a marker of social standing. To Nero’s insincere expressions of deference and gratitude, Seneca must reply with “the thanks that mark the conclusions of all conversations with a master” (14.56.3). Not only does Seneca lack the status to garner Nero’s respect; he also lacks the status to serve as a role model and teach by example, at least as concerns Nero’s own intentions with regard to their friendship. It is impossible for Seneca to demonstrate by his own actions what it means to be a good emperor. This drawback is highlighted in a disparaging speech by Seneca’s enemies (14.52.4).

There is only one person for whom Nero feels the kind of respect (*reuerentia*) that is required if the example and surveillance of the more progressed friend is to have an

35 Brinkmann 2002, 53-70, quote from p. 55, my translation.

36 Dürr 1940, 46 and Griffin 1992, 432, 441.

effect: Agrippina. After his mother's death, Nero "let himself loose on all the forms of depravity which, though repressed with difficulty, respect for his mother (such as it was) had managed to check" (14.13.2). Agrippina could have supported the honorable efforts of the mentor she had chosen for her son so that Nero would have benefited from the loving attention of two worthy authority figures. But again the model is perverted. It is from Agrippina's example that Nero learns how to kill for power. After he has poisoned Britannicus, employing the very same Locusta who provided the poison that killed Claudius (12.66.2; 13.15.3), his mother realizes "that a precedent (*exemplum*) had been set for murdering a family member" (13.16.4). This is correctly understood as a reference to matricide: Agrippina realizes that Nero is capable of killing her. But the indeterminate expression and the connection between the murder of Britannicus and that of Claudius encourage the reader to think of *that* precedent (*exemplum*) as well: Nero has learned his lesson from Agrippina's example.³⁷ Rather than helping to improve the character of her son, Agrippina appears in the role of a second pupil that must be checked as well. Instead of fruitful co-operation between educator and mother, there arises an antagonism that reduces Seneca's ability to exert control over Nero's impulses. He is compelled to court Nero against Agrippina and for this purpose even begins to reinforce Nero's lust and cruelty: he encourages Nero's affair with Acte (13.13.1) and remains silent when Poppaea nourishes the emperor's deadly hatred of his mother (14.1.3).

Senecan progressor friendship thrives in a secluded space, in which a few like-minded men seek each other's company and avoid the contact with the many. As Nero's friend, however, Seneca is only one of several actors surrounding the protagonist. One might even object that a reading of Nero's portrait through the lens of Seneca's conception of friendship is unwarranted because of the large number of different interactants. However, the social context that Tacitus creates for Nero is structured in terms of relations as a mode of learning and a shared effort toward moral improvement. As I will argue in the rest of this paper, the model and its inversion extend beyond Nero and Seneca himself. The whole court appears as a battlefield on which "good arts" struggle against "evil arts", with Seneca and Burrus as the main representatives of the good side and first Agrippina, then Poppaea and Tigellinus as the bad side.³⁸

Seneca's role as mentor and educator is reduplicated not only by the positive counterpart Burrus, a paragon of "strict morality" (13.2.1), there are negative matches too: a mother, who teaches her son cruelty and does not refrain from incest to direct his passions to her cause (14.2.1-2), and a host of evil tutors, educators, and philosophers. The completely reckless Anicetus, who took care of Nero as a boy (14.3.3), perpetrates the matricide (14.3.3; 14.7-8) and helps bring about Octavia's end by "confessing" to have committed adultery with her (14.62). After Agrippina has removed all the honest

37 Eck 1993, 68.

38 See in particular 14.52-53 and, e.g., Brinkmann 2002, 85-86, with further references.

ones already during Claudius' lifetime (12.41), Britannicus' tutors know neither right nor loyalty and, on Nero's orders, administer the poison to their charge (13.14.3-4). Other such figures are the "teachers of wisdom" who crave to entertain the emperor (14.16.2) and the pseudo-philosopher Secundus Carrinas, who loots the temples of Greece and Asia Minor on Nero's orders (15.45.2). Tacitus marks the contrast to the latter by stating directly after this section that Seneca dissociated himself even further from the court because of such impieties (45.3). Of the same ilk is Egnatius, the Stoic who betrays Barea Soranus (16.32.1-2).

Instead of partners for desiring honorable things, Nero seeks company for dishonorable behavior. He prefers "worse men" (14.52.1 *deteriores*) to those who could make him better by their good example. He regrets Narcissus' death because that feedman's lavish spending and avarice wonderfully matched his own inclinations (13.1.3). The actor Paris is rewarded for "stimulating the ruler's excesses" of luxury and lust (13.20.1, 22.2, 27.3). Another beloved master of exquisite pleasures is Petronius (16.18.2-3). Poppaea attracts him by her lack of sexual integrity (*impudicitia*) and every other quality except an honorable mind (13.45.2). Tigellinus, too, is selected for his well known *impudicitia* and ill repute and also for his cruelty. That he is an expert in extravagance is demonstrated at 15.37. In several respects, he appears as an Anti-Seneca. The plot structure, which joins Seneca's downfall to Tigellinus' ascent, enhances the opposition between the two characters in their relation to Nero. Using the phrase *in animo principis* twice, Tacitus underscores that, unlike Seneca (p. 8), Tigellinus was able to reach the emperor's heart.³⁹ The relation between the two is described as the inversion of a progressor friendship in terms reminiscent of Seneca's definition.⁴⁰ The expression *societas* or *socius scelerum* is commonplace,⁴¹ but in Tacitus it occurs only here, and the parallel to Seneca's values is clearly drawn. The recurrence of *obstringere* reminds the reader of Seneca's futile attempts to commit Nero to a good cause (p. 8). Nero and Tigellinus share "evil arts" and crimes, whereas Seneca can no longer uphold "good arts" after the loss of his ally Burrus. The representative of what is right and good needs military support (*uires*). Tigellinus' "evil arts" are welcome and dear to the emperor (*gratae*) by themselves (14.57.1) and therefore endowed with military power when Nero appoints him as one of Burrus' successors (14.51.2). The reader is thus encouraged to think of Tigellinus as the advanced partner in an inverted progressor friendship in which the pair moves away from what is honorable and not toward it.

39 14.51.2; 14.51.3; 15.50.3 *per saeuitiam impudicitiamque Tigellinus in animo principis anteibat*.

40 14.57.1: "Tigellinus' power, moreover, was growing daily, and he now felt that his evil arts (*malas artes*), on which his power entirely depended, would be more appealing to Nero if he bound (*obstringeret*) the emperor to him in a partnership of crime (*societate scelerum*)." Transl. Yardley 2008 with alterations. On Sen. *Epist.* 6.3, see p. 1.

41 Cic. *Q. Rosc.* 96; *Catil.* 1.8; Sal. *Iug.* 33; Curt. 6.11.6; Quint. *Inst.* 12.1.2; Sen. *Oed.* 1024.

On closer analysis, however, matters are different: Tacitus has given the model yet another twist and inverted the roles of teacher and learner. Nero appears to be the one who is educated, but he is the greatest teacher of vice himself. In spite of his many “educators” and his youth and ostensible pliability, Nero does *not* undergo any change of character. In the *Annals*⁴² he is a fully developed villain right from the beginning of his reign. His vices are still hidden (13.1.3) but soon begin to show. He perpetrates the murder of Britannicus in an energetic, decisive manner.⁴³ His strong desire to kill his mother is nothing new; Poppaea only serves as a cue giver.⁴⁴ When Tigellinus tries to bind Nero closer to him, it is *Tigellinus* who believes that he will ingratiate himself to the emperor through shared crimes (14.57.1). The reader knows that it was Nero who had already selected Tigellinus as an associate of vice because of the other’s established villainy.⁴⁵

Although Nero *seems* to be a learner to those around him, in central aspects he begins his reign as finished person and eventually overcomes all restraints imposed on him.⁴⁶ The sequence of failures highlights Nero’s depravity and the impossibility to reform him. His base character, amplified and empowered as it is by his social position, becomes an irresistible evil force – or at least a force that would have required much more robust resistance than just a few struggling courtiers. Nero draws everything with him, not least of all his mentors Seneca and Burrus. In stark contrast to the ideal of frankness characteristic of philosophy and friendship in the *Epistulae morales* (e.g. 3; 6.1; 51.1-2), concealment is a leitmotif in Tacitus’ characterization of Nero. The young man is a natural at hiding his true feelings and desires, and this trait rubs off on his environment.⁴⁷ To maintain their influence at court, Seneca and Burrus must flatter and lie, and are forced to connive in misbehavior and outright crimes. Having murdered Britannicus, Nero enriches the most influential of his friends (13.18.1). Tacitus reports two contemporary assessments of this event. According to the first, men “with pretensions to austerity” are revealed as hypocrites, who share the possessions of the dead prince “like plunder”. The justification offered by others, that the friends had no choice but to submit to the emperor’s offer and have themselves bound (*obstrinxisse*) to loyalty with lavish gifts, also supports the point I wish to make. Tacitus uses the same

42 At Tac. *Hist.* 1.72.1, it is clearly Tigellinus who corrupts Nero: *corrupto ad omne facinus Nerone*. Cassius Dio also presents Nero as a more independent agent (Tresch 1965).

43 Schmitzer 2005 highlights Nero’s control of the proceedings.

44 After Iunia Silana’s allegations, Nero is impatient (*avidus*) to kill his mother (13.20.3). His fear abates (21.1), but there is no hint that the desire to kill decreases as well. Agrippina’s defense moves her audience (21.6), but Nero is not among them. The matricide is introduced as a deed considered and planned for a long time (14.1.1) *before* Tacitus he narrates Poppaea’s instigations.

45 14.51.2-3; note in particular *ueterem* and *pro cognitio moribus*.

46 13.3.3; 13.12.2; 14.14.2.

47 14.56.3; Edwards 1994. See also p. 11.

word *obstringere* which expresses the attempts of Seneca and Tigellinus to commit Nero to their aims (p. 8 and 11). As we see here, the binding forces operate in the inverse direction. Nero implicates his friends in a maelstrom of crime of which there is no other exit than full dissociation from the arch-criminal, a process which can only be completed in death. Stoic progressors observe in themselves many evils that need to be remedied, and this unites them in their “partnership for desiring honorable things” (*Epist.* 6.3). Here, too, one of the friends is aware that he has done wrong; but instead of seeking a partner for mutual improvement, he tries to remove the necessity for moral improvement by forcing his better friends to lower their moral standards to his own baseness. One of these friends must have been Seneca.⁴⁸ At least, the reader will learn that Seneca became very rich under Nero, and several references to his new acquisitions⁴⁹ have the effect of creating serious doubts about the philosopher’s detachment from material goods,⁵⁰ whatever the reasons for accepting the gifts may have been in the first place. After Nero’s failed attempt to murder Agrippina – of which Seneca and Burrus *may* have known beforehand, according to Tacitus⁵¹ – both advise Nero about the completion of the crime and help to conceal it. In the course of this, Burrus initiates the series of adulatory congratulations, which culminate in Nero proudly ascending the Capitole in triumph over the state he has enslaved (14.13.2). In this section, Burrus makes others cringe to the emperor; a little later he himself joins the ranks, “grieving and applauding”,⁵² an utterly pathetic figure forced to show himself overwhelmed by the divine voice’s performance.⁵³ Burrus and Seneca are Nero’s involuntary partners in crime rather than in “desiring honorable things”.

They are not the only victims of Nero as a teacher of evil. Even his vicious associates become worse in his company. No court was a better breeding place for evil characters than Nero’s (14.13.1). The emperor’s corrupting influence pervades all strata of society. With nocturnal raids and by instigating competing fan groups in the theatre, he counteracts honorable measures of the Senate (13.24.1). The city is infested with

48 See, e.g., Henry and Walker 1963, 102; Dyson 1970, 73-74; Abel 1985, 675, 684; Griffin 1992, 303. *Potissimos* corresponds to expressions for Seneca’s power such as in 13.2.1 (*potentiae, pollebant*). Tacitus indicates that Seneca was aware of the fratricide by having him refer to it in his death scene (15.62.2; see Fabbri 1978-1979, 419-420).

49 13.42.4; 14.52.2; 14.53.2 and 5; 14.54.2; 14.55.4; 15.64.4; compare 16.17.3-4.

50 See Geiser 2007 on this technique, which she calls “emotionale Ebene der Darstellung”.

51 14.7.2 *incertum an et ante ignaros* (according to the reading of the Mediceus; see Koestermann 1968, 37-38 on the problems of this reading). Tresch 1965, 103 would not exclude prior knowledge of the deed. Dyson 1970, 74 and Schmal 2008, 113 point out that Seneca, not Burrus, suggests further action (14.7.3), but see Dürr 1940, 48-49.

52 14.15.4, transl. Yardley 2008 altered.

53 The stern military man Burrus may have been chosen for greater effect. Cassius Dio presents Seneca as leading the applause (61.20.3).

violence as if an enemy were sacking it and comes close to civil war.⁵⁴ Nero's passion for base pleasures (*uoluptates*) "pulls" (*trahat*) the people toward uninhibited self-indulgence (14.14.2). Nero defiles members of the elite by having them mount the stage together with him (14.15), an event that Tacitus presents as a significant step in the depravation of public morals (14.15.3). The whole city becomes Nero's playground and the stage for orgies in which he overturns the role of the emperor as a role model by exemplifying his lust in acts of public copulation (15.37).

In sum, Tacitus' account of Nero has a number of features that may be read as a reception of Seneca's ideals about friendship between philosophers. A reading of the narrative with a view to this model can illuminate important aspects of Nero's characterization. His relations with others can be read as an inverted and malfunctioning version of progressor friendship embedded in a social context in which educational and moral ideals are turned on their head. This inversion characterizes both the person Nero and the political institution that amplifies his evil nature. It also shows the conditions for ethical behavior at an emperor's court and the difficulty for a fallible but well meaning person to act both effectively and decently in such an environment.⁵⁵

This reading presupposes a considerable degree of fiction in Tacitus' account, or at least drastic selection, artful composition, and creative attribution of beliefs, emotions, and motives. Shaping the narrative by the conceptual framework of Senecan philosopher friendship was more than an homage to an admired author or a sophisticated intertextual game. The unique educational perspective differentiates Tacitus' presentation of Nero from that of other emperors in the *Annals* and lends it its extraordinary tragic force. Although sly and insincere, Tiberius is not only restrained but shaped by those around him (n. 2). Indolent Claudius is manipulated by his women and freedmen but remains the same amorphous figure than before. Nero, on the other hand, *appears* to be malleable, and on a superficial reading, Tacitus' account looks very much like a negative *Bildungsroman*. Yet, by thwarting precisely these reader expectations, which mirror the hopes and aspirations of men like Seneca in the account itself, Tacitus can show the full impact of depravity endowed with imperial power. There is a moral development, indeed, but the *Bildung* turns out to be corruption, and it is not the emperor who changes to the worse, but his subjects.

54 13.25, in particular 13.25.1 *foeda domi lasciuiia*; 25.2 *in modum captiuitatis*; 25.4 *discordi populo et grauioris motus terrore*. Nero's practice of "wandering through the city streets, the brothels, and the taverns dressed as a slave to conceal his identity" and accompanied by a gang of thugs (13.25.1), contrasts a situation opposite to that described by Seneca in *De clementia* 1.8.1-2. There, the emperor ensures that his subjects can walk the streets freely, while he himself may not. If the contrast was deliberate, it would be yet another of those many inversions. On this passage, see Degl'Innocenti Pierini 2014, 181-182.

55 Similarly Ker 2012, 309; Griffin 1992, 442-443. See also, e.g., Syme 1958, vol. 2, 552 and Trillitzsch 1971, 95-98.

Literaturverzeichnis

- Abel, Karlhans. „Die taciteische Seneca-Rezeption.“ *ANRW II* 33.4 (1991): 3155-3181.
- Ash, Rhiannon. *Ordering Anarchy: Armies and Leaders in Tacitus' Histories*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.
- Baar, Manfred. *Das Bild des Kaisers Tiberius bei Tacitus, Sueton und Cassius Dio*. Stuttgart: Teubner, 1990.
- Brinkmann, Michael. *Seneca in den Annalen des Tacitus*. Bonn: Dissertation, 2002. Web. 23. 8 14. <<http://hss.ulb.uni-bonn.de/2002/0092/0092.pdf>>.
- Daitz, Stephen G. „Tacitus' technique of character portrayal.“ *AJPh* 81 (1960): 30-52.
- Degl'Innocenti Pierini, Rita. „Freedom in Seneca: Some Refections on the Relationship between Philosophy and Politics, Public and Private Life.“ *Seneca Philosophus*. Hrsg. Marcia L. Colish und Julia Wildberger. Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2014. 167-187.
- Dürr, Karl. „Seneca bei Tacitus.“ *Gymnasium* 51 (1940): 42-61.
- Dyson, Stephen L. „The Portrait of Seneca in Tacitus.“ *Arethusa* 3 (1970): 71-83.
- Eck, Werner. *Agrippina, die Stadtgründerin Kölns: Eine Frau in der frühkaiserzeitlichen Politik*. 2. Köln: Greven, 1993.
- Edwards, Catharine. „Beware of Imitations: Theatre and the Subversion of Imperial Identity.“ *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History, & Representation*. Hrsg. Jaś Elsner und Jamie Masters. Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994. 83-97.
- Fabrizi, Renata. „La pagina 'senecana' di Tacito (Ann. 15.60-65).“ *AIV* 137 (1978-1979): 409-427.
- Geiser, Melanie. *Personendarstellung bei Tacitus am Beispiel von Cn. Domitius Corbulo und Ser. Sulpicius Galba*. Remscheid: Gardez!, 2007.
- Griffin, Miriam T. *Seneca on Society: A Guide to De Beneficiis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- . *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.
- Habinek, Thomas. *The Politics of Latin Literature: Writing, Identity, and Empire in Ancient Rome*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Heldmann, Konrad. *Sine ira et studio: Das Subjektivitätsprinzip in der römischen Geschichtsschreibung und das Selbstverständnis der Historiker*. München: Beck, 2011.
- Henry, Denis und Beth Walker. „Tacitus and Seneca.“ *G&R* 10 (1963): 98-110.
- Kapust, Daniel J. *Republicanism, Rhetoric, and Roman Political Thought: Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Ker, James. „Seneca in Tacitus.“ *A Companion to Tacitus*. Hrsg. Victoria E. Pagán. Chichester: Blackwell, 2012. 305-329.

- . *The Deaths of Seneca*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Koestermann, Erich. *Cornelius Tacitus, Annalen: Band III: Buch 11-13*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1968.
- Kraus, Christina S. und Anthony J. Woodman. *Latin Historians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- O’Gorman, Ellen. *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Opelt, Ilona. „Senecas Tod.“ *Der Mensch in Grenzsituationen*. Hrsg. Eckart Olshausen. Stuttgart: Württemberg. Verein z. Förderung der Humanistischen Bildung, 1984. 29-48.
- Rilinger, Rolf. „Seneca und Nero: Konzepte zur Legitimation kaiserlicher Herrschaft.“ *Klio* 78 (1996): 130-157.
- Roller, Matthew. *Constructing Autocracy: Aristocrats and Emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Ryberg, Inez S. „Tacitus’ Art of Innuendo.“ *TAPhA* 73 (1942): 383-404.
- Sailor, Dylan. *Writing and Empire in Tacitus*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Schmal, Stephan. „Held oder Harlekin? Der sterbende Seneca bei Tacitus.“ *Klio* 90 (2008): 105-123.
- Schmitzer, Ulrich. „Der Tod auf offener Szene: Tacitus über Nero und die Ermordung des Britannicus.“ *Hermes* 133 (2005): 337-357.
- Seita, Mario. „Un’affaire politico-giudiziaria dell’antica Roma: l’attacco di Suillio a Seneca.“ *Latomus* 41 (1982): 312-328.
- Syme, Ronald. *Tacitus*. 2 Bde. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.
- Tacitus. *The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberus, Claudius, and Nero*. Übers. J. C. Yardley. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Too, Yun Lee. „Educating Nero: A Reading of Seneca’s Moral Epistles.“ *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History & Representation*. Hrsg. Jaś Elsner und Jamie Masters. London: Duckworth, 1994. 211-224.
- Trillitzsch, Winfried. *Seneca im literarischen Urteil der Antike: Darstellung und Sammlung der Zeugnisse*. Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1971.
- Turpin, William. „Tacitus, Stoic Exempla, and the ‘praecipuum munus annalium’.“ *CIAnt* 27 (2008): 359-404.
- Vielberg, Meinolf. *Pflichten, Werte, Ideale: Eine Untersuchung zu den Wertvorstellungen des Tacitus*. Stuttgart: Steiner, 1987.
- Wildberger, Jula. „Amicitia and Eros: Seneca’s Adaptation of a Stoic Concept of Friendship for Roman Men in Progress.“ *Philosophie in Rom*. Hrsg. Gernot Michael Müller. Basel: Schwabe, Forthcoming.
- . „Simus inter exempla! Formen und Funktionen beispielhafter Weltflucht in der frühen Kaiserzeit.“ *Der Mensch zwischen Weltflucht und Weltverantwortung: Lebensmodelle der paganen und der*

Senecan progressor friendship in Tacitus *Annals*

jüdisch-christlichen Antike. Hrsg. Heinz-Günther Nesselrath und Meike Rühl. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014. 85-109.

Woodman, Anthony J. „'Aliena facundia': Seneca in Tacitus.“ *Form and Function in Roman Oratory*. Hrsg. D. H. Berry und Andrew Erskine. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 294-308.

—. *Tacitus Reviewed*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

Zimmermann, Bernhard. „Der Tod des Philosophen Seneca: Stoische probatio in Literatur, Kunst und Musik.“ *Stoizismus in der europäischen Philosophie, Literatur, Kunst und Politik: Eine Kulturgeschichte von der Antike bis zur Moderne*. Hrsg. Barbara Neymeyr, Jochen Schmidt und Bernhard Zimmermann. Bd. 1. Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2008. 2 Bde. 393-422.

Zimmermann, Bernhard. „Tacitus und Seneca.“ *Seneca: philosophus et magister*. Hrsg. Thomas Baier, Gesine Manuwald und Bernhard Zimmermann. Freiburg: Rombach, 2005. 261-272.