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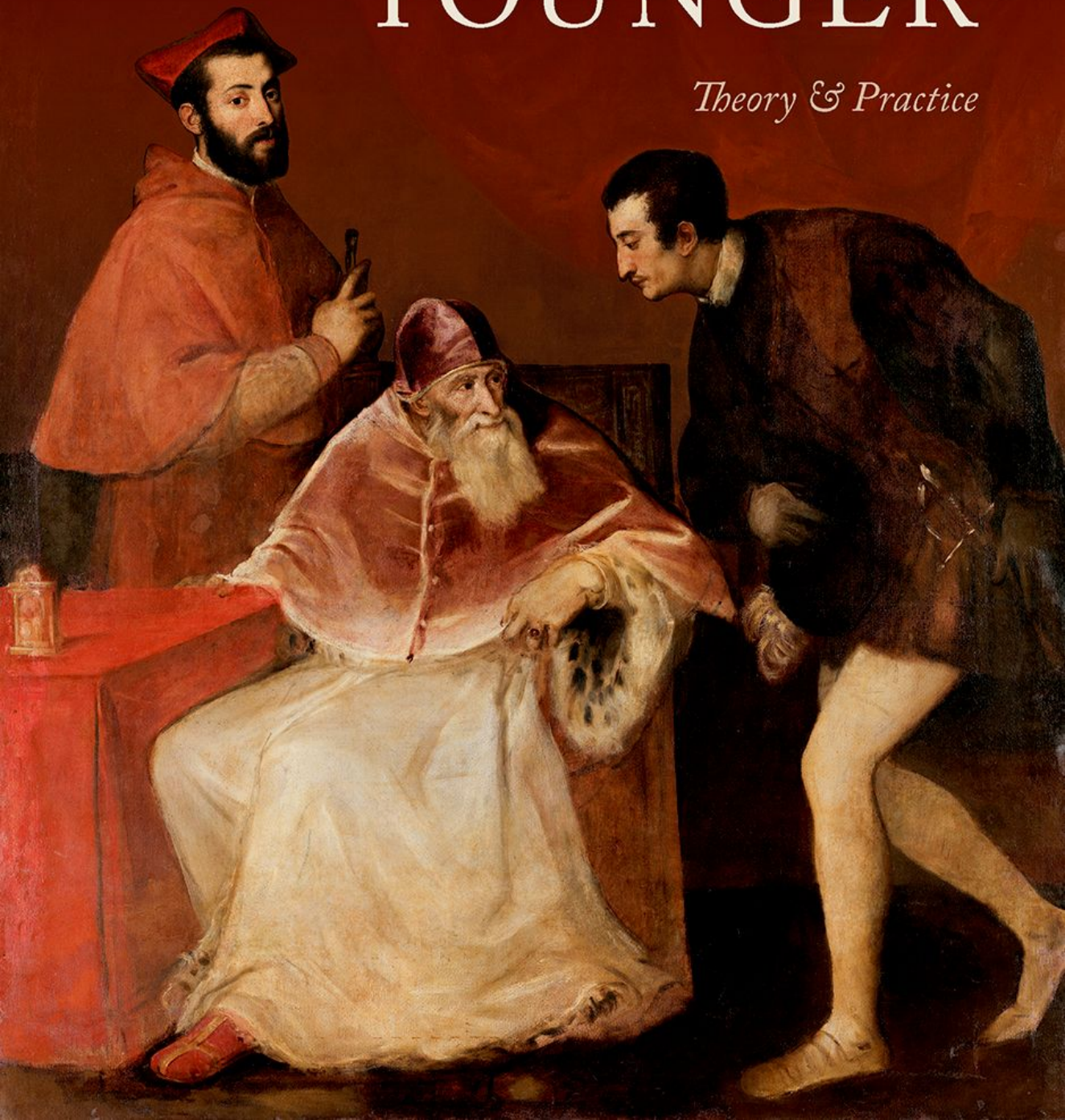
MARTINA RUSSO

FLATTERY *in* SENECA THE YOUNGER

Theory & Practice



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To Claudio, Lena, and Giorgia

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Nihil esse grato animo honestius.
Sen. *Epist.* 81.30

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Rome/London
December 2023

Contents

Note on the Text and Translations

I have used the *Oxford Classical Texts* of Latin and Greek authors when available and unless otherwise indicated. All translations of Seneca's texts are from *The Complete Works of Seneca the Younger* (Chicago University Press) unless otherwise specified. Translations used for other texts discussed in the monograph are indicated in specific notes. I have tried to keep abbreviations to a minimum, but where they are used, they follow the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Abbreviations of Latin authors and works are those of *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*. Abbreviations of Greek authors and works are those of *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*. I provide an Appendix for the translation of all long passages.

Introduction

Ταρβῶ μὲν εἰπεῖν τοὺς λόγους ἐλευθέρους πρὸς τὸν τύραννον.

I tremble to speak the words of freedom before the tyrant.

Eur. *Bacc.* 775

I.1 Framing Subject

'Aliter' inquis 'loqueris, aliter vivis' is the primary charge Seneca attempted to answer in *De vita beata*.[1] Finding a solution to this problem is an unlikely feat, so my aim is to investigate Seneca's work from a different perspective and to reassess a series of key questions highlighted by scholars. In doing so, I cannot assert any sort of objective neutrality: as Barchiesi remarks, 'the history of classical studies has shown us that there is no objective, stable position from which to look at the past "from outside"'.[2]

This book investigates the discourse of flattery in Seneca's philosophical texts. Seneca himself developed a theory of flattery, which has not yet been considered in detail because it has been taken for granted that Seneca was a flatterer and a two-faced philosopher. The generally accepted view makes Seneca one of literature's great hypocrites.[3] Seneca himself adopted the maxim *quod sentimus loquamur, quod loquimur sentiamus; concordet sermo cum vita*.[4] In a famous *Letter* to Lucilius, Seneca claims: *talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita*.[5] These statements, alongside works like the consolation addressed to Polybius earned Seneca a reputation for duplicity. Seneca's own life is marked by the need to find a balance between the philosophical aspiration to freedom and the necessity to adapt his

[1] Cf. *Vit. b.* 18.1. Quotations from Seneca's *Dialogi* are from Reynolds's OCT edition (1977).

[2] Cf. Barchiesi (1997, 5).

[3] Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 14.52.3 on the *rumor* that Seneca increased his poetic production to please Nero; 13.42 on Publius Suillius Rufus' accusation (cf. Seita (1982); Bloomer (1997, 116); Rudich (1997, 17; 71); Allegri (2012, 367–368)). *Contra*, in *Ann.* 15.61.1, Seneca's dying words assert that he was not prone to flattery (cf. Griffin (1976, 441–444); Habinek (2000, 264); Ash (2018, 279)). For an extensive analysis of Seneca's presence in Tacitus, see Dyson (1970) and Ker (2012). Cf. Iuv. 10.16; D.C. 61.10.2–6; cf. Rudich (1997, 52–59); Jones (2014); Berno (2023, 110–116). Among the principal reasons for regarding Seneca as a hypocrite has always been his conspicuous wealth: cf. von Albrecht (2003); Levick (2003); E. Wilson (2014).

[4] *Epist.* 75.4.

[5] *Epist.* 114.1; see Armisen-Marchetti (1989, 41–42); Berti (2018, 59–61); Edwards (2019, 290–292).

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own conduct in a historical *milieu* that places serious obstacles to free speech and free thought; the gulf between freedom and repression is forcefully voiced by Seneca's *imago*.

Seneca's high political standing as one of the most influential *amici principis* attracted pointed criticism and natural envy from his contemporaries.[6] As Syme remarks, '*amicitia* presupposes *inimicitia*, inherited or acquired: a statesman could not win power and influence without making many enemies'.[7] It is not hard to suppose pangs of resentment at the rise to power of a man of a non-senatorial family under the principate. Yet this does not mean that all charges against him were unfounded: Seneca was not a moralist (nor he did want to be), and he did not abide by his maxim *concordet sermo cum vita*.[8] Seneca's negative reputation is especially due to the consolation addressed to Polybius, which hostile contemporary opinion probably regarded as a work of fulsome adulation.[9] Later on, in the *De vita beata* Seneca sets out to restate his naïveté, by trying to counter to the charges against him and bridge the yawning gap between his philosophical claims and daily conduct.[10] As Bartsch points out, 'there is no doubt that in the course of his lifetime he put on at least two contradictory performances to show who he was to two very different audiences. One Seneca was on display for the imperial court. . . . The other Senecan "self" was for an audience of readers whom he cultivated throughout his writings, but especially with his works of the early 60s CE: that is, the readers of his *Epistles*, and their readers in posterity: us'.[11]

When thinking of Seneca, we consider him an *exemplum* par excellence of the flatterer, often underestimating his acute understanding of its capabilities from his political role, which also made him an eyewitness to multiple forms of flattery and, probably, a recipient of flattery. Therefore, Seneca was in the perfect position to define the flatterer in his multifarious facets. This book addresses Seneca's profound ambivalence towards public life and private conduct, engagement with power and withdrawal from the imperial court, and his exceptional status as both a paradigm of the flatterer and a possible beneficiary of flattery.

I.2 The Semantics of Flattery

I will compare texts in which Seneca defines the flatterer with other texts in which a theory of flattery (*adulatio*) is put into practice, such as the consolation

[6] Wildberger (2018a; 2018b) investigates how one could define himself *amicus* (and specifically *amicus principis*), when one was aware of being only a *proficiens* 'would-be wise', and, according to Stoicism, only the wise could be a true friend.

[7] Syme (1939, 13).

[8] Seneca often describes himself as imperfect, on the same level as Lucilius: cf. *Epist.* 52.7; 68.9; 75.1.

[9] Griffin (1976, 415).

[10] Cf. *Vit. b.* 18.1–3; cf. Berno (2023, 116–128).

[11] Bartsch (2015b, 187). On the representation of the 'self' in Senecan *Letters*, see Edwards (1997b). For the *imago* that Seneca wanted to leave to posterity, see Griffin (1974).

addressed to Polybius and the political treatise, *De clementia*, addressed to Nero.[12] According to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (*OLD*), *adulatio* indicates:

1. (Of dogs, etc . . .) The act of fawning upon (also applied to the courtship of pigeons).
2. Prostrating oneself as an act of homage, obeisance.
3. Obsequious or servile flattery, adulation.

Nonius Marcellus (AD IV) claims that *adulatio est blandimentum proprie canum, quod et ad homines tractum consuetudine est* ('flattery is, in the proper sense, the fawning of dogs, which is metaphorically used for humans', 17.2).[13] Strictly connected to *adulatio* are *blanditia* (*blandities*) defined by the *OLD* as 'ingratiating behaviour or speech, blandishment(s), flattery' and *assentatio* 'flattering agreement or compliance, adulation, toadyism'.[14] What is significant is that the term *adulatio* first appears only in the late Republic, starting from Julius Caesar.[15] The term's absence from early Roman literature until the end of Republic is a clear indication that the concept does not exist, or, at least, was not widespread.[16] Even the analogous *assentatio*, apart from Plautus (*Bacch.* 411), does not recur before Cicero.[17] Similarly, *blanditia* apart from a few occurrences in Plautus and one in Lucilius, is dated only from Cicero, who matches *blanditia* with *assentatio* and *adulatio*: *nullam in amicitiis pestem esse maiorem quam adulationem, blanditiam, assentationem.*[18] I suggest that the frequency of terms related to flattery evidences that flattery, as I will attempt to demonstrate in this book, is a peculiar characteristic of the Empire, closely interlinked with the absolute power embraced by the emperor.

While the word *adulatio* and its synonyms appear late in Roman literature, the figure of the flatterer has a long history: this 'type' so pervasive in Roman literature and society can be assimilated into the Greek κόλαξ. Ribbeck still represents the starting point for defining the character of the κόλαξ.[19] The κόλαξ—the Greek translation of *adulator*—is the evolution of the parasite (παράσιτος) who oversaw banquets held in the temples dedicated to Apollo or in the Prytaneion and, from the fifth century BC, becomes a stock character of comedy.[20] Roman comedy

[12] Surprisingly, Kapust (2018), who mentions Aristotle, Cicero, and Plutarch alongside Isocrates, Pliny, and Tacitus, does not consider Seneca.

[13] Cf. Cic. *Nat. deor.* 2.158; Lucr. 5.1063–1072; Col. *Rust.* 7.12.5; Sen. *Ad Marc.* 12.2.

[14] On the meaning of *blanditiae* in a political context, see Hellegouarc'h (1963, 213–215). For an analysis of the words connected to *adulatio*, cf. Rees (2010). Cicero prefers *blanditia* (50) and its cognates to *adulatio* (8) and its cognates.

[15] Caes. *Civ.* 1.4.3: *adulatio atque ostentatio sui et potentium.*

[16] Cf. *TLL* I 874.39–876.41, *s.v.*

[17] Cf. *TLL* II 853.44–854.46, *s.v.* Cf. *Lael.* 89: *assentatio vitiorum adiutrix procul amoveatur, quae non modo amico sed ne libero quidem digna est.*

[18] Cic. *Lael.* 91.

[19] Ribbeck (1883) requires updating, especially in light of the new literary discoveries, including 130 lines of Menander's *Κόλαξ* on papyrus. Cf. Kroll, *RE* XI, 1, 1069–1070 *s.v.* Kolax.

[20] Cf. *OCD s.v.* parasite; Ribbeck (1883, 30–31); Millett (1989, 30–32); McC. Brown (1992, 98–102); Damon (1997); Barsby (1999, 126–127); Fisher (2000, 371–378).

inherits this character, namely the *parasitus*.[21] The parasite par excellence is Terence's Gnatho, who pompously claims to be the πρῶτος εὑρετής ('first inventor') of the technique of flattery.[22] It is clear from its beginning that flattery is associated with servitude, an association I will develop at length in this book. It is remarkable that, originally, flattery concerned only the lowest stratum of Roman society, but, after the *princeps* came to power, flattery concerned everyone, even members of the highest orders of Roman society. Following this social transformation, the abstract *adulatio* and other words related to flattery become prevalent.

I.3 Flattery in Imperial Rome

However distasteful writers' flattery may be to modern readers, it should be assessed within the literary and political environment of the principate and can be perceived as an alternative strategy to avoid the 'ineluctable collusion' between the poet and the emperor.[23] As Wallace-Hadrill remarks, 'flattery and the concealment of true feelings were a structural necessity'.[24] In Spencer's words, 'flattery tends to be depicted as the logical if not quite inevitable result of the disparity between ruler and subject, a form of excessive courtesy that corrupts on a very insidious level'.[25] I will argue that Seneca's flattery should not be read merely as a form of corruption but as essentially an attempt at political resistance. In the role of an expert courtier, Seneca has to adapt his performance to circumstances.[26] We should consider flattery as a political phenomenon in the Roman Empire and explore how Seneca tries to square his philosophical inclinations with his preeminent role at the court of Nero.

Although traditional scholarship takes a dim view of Seneca, we should be aware that anyone called to speak to power in imperial Rome got their hands dirty. At the opening of his *Annales*, Tacitus asserts that people usually speak too positively of living emperors because of fear (*metus*) and spew their hate out when they die.[27] During the Roman Empire, there is no space for *libertas*—as the historian, who speaks of *foedissima adulatio* (*Ann*. 3.57.2), remarks—and it is almost impossible to find clear evidence of dissidence; his Rome brims with

[21] Terence at *Eun*. 25–26 refers to two Latin plays of Naevius and Plautus probably based on Menander's *Κόλαξ*. We possess only one fragment of a *Colax* of Naevius (*com*. 27–35), and four fragments of a *Colax* of Plautus (*OCT* II frr. 51–56).

[22] Cf. Ter. *Eun*. 247: *ego adeo hanc primus inveni viam*. Indeed, flattery is not unique to Gnatho; see Barsby (1999, 131). Cf. Cic. *Lael*. 93–94.

[23] Hardie (1997, 182) in reference to the end of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* speaks of the 'ineluctable collusion between artist and ruler'.

[24] Cf. Wallace-Hadrill (1996, 305). [25] Spencer (2002, 79). [26] Cf. *Tranq*. 14.1.

[27] Cf. Tac. *Ann*. 1.1.2: *Tiberii Gaique et Claudii ac Neronis res florentibus ipsis ob metum falsae, postquam occiderant recentibus odiis compositae sunt*.

fallaces amicitiae (*Ann.* 4.33.3).[28] According to Tacitus, the desire to flatter (*libido adsentandi*, *Hist.* 1.1.1), alongside ignorance and animosity against the ruler, is responsible for the collapse of historical truth.[29] In the preface to his *Historiae* (1.1.4), to celebrate the inauguration of the reign of Nerva and to mark the gap between Domitian and the new emperor, Tacitus claims: *rara temporum felicitate ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet*. As O'Gorman observes, 'it is difficult for contemporary readers to read this as anything other than the sort of flattery that Tacitus has just condemned as corrosive to imperial politics'.[30]

Until his retirement in 62, Seneca was completely enmeshed in the imperial court and it would be unrealistic to map direct criticism about the politics of the time onto his works. Apart from the *Apocolocyntosis* and other scattered allusions to Gaius, Seneca rarely refers to or makes explicit judgements about other *principes*.[31] Nevertheless, I agree with Edwards's view of the 'absent presence' of Nero in late Seneca's *Epistulae morales*, where the presence of Nero resonates between the lines.[32] Indeed, in Seneca's later works, there emerges a characterization of the principate as despotic, one in which the boundaries of law, property, and morality are continually subverted.[33] Nonetheless, a flattering tone remains in Seneca's last production.[34]

Alongside the paramount development of strategies to flatter and (dis)simulate, another specific trait of imperial literature is the decline of oratory, which is often attributed to the absence of freedom in speaking and writing and to the need for imperial encomia. In the parabola from Republic into Empire, oratory has lost its civic function and has become solely a site for virtuoso display, as Tacitus remarks in the *Dialogus de oratoribus*. Furthermore, the places available for public speech changed significantly: Romans began to exercise their rhetorical skills neither in the forum nor in the Senate, but in the school of rhetoric, where speeches were pronounced in the form of *recitatio*. In sum, oratory became a spectacle, a public display of personal skills, and oratory was transformed into panegyric, or praise oratory, whose most famous example is the panegyric to Trajan pronounced by Pliny the Younger in 100.[35] Pliny cannot elude the thorny dichotomy of frankness vs flattery. As Bartsch observes, 'Pliny himself acknowledges here that the highest form of flattery is to appear to be frank. But if he avoids the appearance of flattery, *species adulationis*, it is to adopt instead the appearance of outspokenness, *species*

[28] Cf. *Ann.* 2.12.3: *amicis inesse adulationem*; 2.32.2: *quorum auctoritates adulationesque rettuli ut sciretur vetus id in re publica malum*. For an excellent discussion of flattery in Tacitus, see O'Gorman (2020); Barrandon (2021).

[29] Cf. *Hist.* 1.32.1; 1.90.3.

[30] O'Gorman (2020, 8).

[31] Even Seneca's references to Gaius aim to give moral insight, by focusing on the vices of the man, not on his politics: cf. *Ad Pol.* 13.1; 17.4–6; *Ad Helv.* 10.4.

[32] Cf. Edwards (2015; 2021); M. Wilson (2015). Letta (1999, 125–134) investigates possible references to Nero in the *Letters*; cf. below (7.1).

[33] Cf. Letta (1999, 97).

[34] On Seneca's flattery of Nero in the *Naturales quaestiones*, see below (8.1).

[35] All dates are AD unless noted.

libertatis, as a specific stratagem for praise'.[36] By praising Trajan, Pliny points out a new definition of *libertas*, which relies on *obsequium* and *modestia* towards the *princeps*.[37] The association of *libertas* with *obsequium* and *modestia* points out patent contradictions and denounces its self-evident incongruity. Pliny's *Panegyricus* should be read not only as a manifesto of *adulatio* but as a text which proposes a new theory of flattery: while Pliny praises the new emperor Trajan and the renewal of freedom he represents, it becomes evident early on that Trajan in practice is responsible only for a *species libertatis* and the display of (illusory) freedom becomes the highest demonstration of flattery.[38] Addressing Nero by claiming *maluerim veris offendere quam placere adulando* (*Clem*. 2.2.2), Seneca had already understood that reclaiming frankness was the best way to flatter the *princeps*.[39]

The decline of oratory is, therefore, directly related, on the one side, to the rise of flattery and, on the other, to the decay of *libertas* 'frankness of speech, outspokenness, plain speaking' (*OLD* 7) and *licentia* 'frankness of speech, outspokenness' (*OLD* 3). As Foucault argues, παρρησία ('speaking freely', the Greek equivalent of Roman *libertas* or *licentia*) is in a strict relationship with *adulatio*.[40] In his provocative reading, Foucault suggests that παρρησία has two 'adversaries': a moral adversary and a technical one; the first is flattery, the second is rhetoric, the art of persuading our interlocutor.[41] Foucault rightly underlines that flattery and rhetoric are 'profoundly connected to each other since the moral basis of rhetoric is always flattery in fact, and the privileged instrument of flattery is of course the technique, and possibly the tricks of rhetoric'.[42] As we shall see, Seneca's works demonstrate that rhetoric and flattery are intimately entwined; their mutual dependence, which leads to the linked practice of doublespeak, alongside the remark on the absence of freedom, also emerges from the historical *exempla* chosen by Seneca.

I.4 Theoretical Approaches

My book relies on two theoretical approaches: the first, the doublespeak theory, derives from a contemporary narratological theory applied to several disciplines;

[36] Bartsch (1994, 180); cf. Bartsch (2012). *Species* is defined by the *OLD* (6) as 'the semblance (of something other than is the actual case)' and 'illusory appearance'.

[37] Cf. Plin. *Paneg*. 66.4: *iubes esse liberos: erimus; iubes quae sentimus promere in medium: proferemus*; *Paneg.* 68.5: *amamus quidem te in quantum mereris; istud tamen non tui facimus amore sed nostri*; see Morford (1992).

[38] Cf. Bartsch (1994, 148–187); Connolly (2009, 278); Rosati (2011).

[39] Cf. Ash (2018, 279).

[40] Foucault (2005, 379) defines παρρησία as 'anti-flattery'. On the correspondence between the Greek παρρησία and the Roman *licentia*, cf. Quint. *Inst*. 9.2.27: *quam Cornificius licentiam vocat, Graeci παρρησίαν*. On the Latin translations of παρρησία, cf. Scarpat (1964).

[41] For definitions of rhetoric, cf. Arist. *Rh*. 1.2.1355b; cf. Quint. *Inst*. 2.14–21; S.E. *M*. 2.61–62.

[42] Cf. Foucault (2005, 373).

the second, the pragmatics of exemplarity, focuses on the impact of historical *exempla* in ancient culture. The interconnection between flattery and rhetoric, advocated by Foucault (above, 1.3), implies new communicative strategies; interacting with people endowed with power also meant inventing new ways of expressing ideas: doublespeak—saying one thing and meaning another—is one way to deviate from the constraining effects of imperial oppression.[43] My thinking about the possibilities of disclosing more levels of reading has been informed by scholars who have explored the interrelationship between literature and state power, such as Bartsch. In her 1994 book *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian*, Bartsch argues that opposing categories such as praise and blame often 'conflate', and explore 'what happens to language's ability to *mean* when all communication is distorted by the pull of a centralized and autocratic authority'.[44] As Bartsch herself points out, her work can be seen as the development of Scott's reflections on domination and dissimulation in power relations.[45] Subordinates are compelled to perform a role and their 'performance' provides evidence for the unequal distribution of power. Along the same lines drawn by Bartsch, Scott, a political theorist, argues that subordinates on one level have to conform to the 'public transcript', that is what is officially required by the dominant, while, on another level, they voice an oppositional claim, in Scott's words, a 'hidden transcript' that expresses the authentic voice of the subordinates.[46] This oppressive climate of the Roman Empire's *régime* forces its subordinates, including Seneca, to find new ways to express these feelings.

My book is concerned with the dialogic relationship between state power and literature, as revealed in Seneca's thinking and writing. Since he was deeply involved in Roman politics, Seneca was forced to seek new ways of expressing both praise and criticism. My point is not to examine these two aspects separately, though aspects of each will be debated; rather, my primary object of study is to examine how praise and criticism often coexist in the same texts, although only the former is visible at first sight.[47] Another work that has been fundamental to my awareness of the possibility of revealing traces of criticism in texts where we normally do not expect to find reproach is Ahl's 1984 article 'The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome', where he explores 'figured speech' (ἐσχηματισμένος λόγος, *figurata oratio*) in Greek and Roman writers. In Ahl's

[43] See Bartsch's definition of doublespeak (1994, 65): 'it is only when an audience registers that a given speech or verse contains a meaning other than the one dictated (in public life) by political convention or (in literature) by the additional factors or fictional context and literary precedent, that doublespeak is born'.

[44] Bartsch (1994, vi). Murgia (1980, 123), in reference to Maternus' speech, claims 'Maternus gives an example of the kind of double-talk that was essential under the empire for personal safety, and which normally communicated one thing to supporters of the emperor, another to his opponents'.

[45] Cf. Bartsch (1994, 11–12).

[46] Cf. Scott (1990, 2–3).

[47] Gauly (2004, 193–207) argues the presence of a double level of reading in the *Naturales quaestiones*.

words, 'it is my contention that there is a long tradition of "figuring" language in the interests of both tact and safety, and that this tradition reaches back beyond the documented beginnings of Greek and Roman rhetoric and forward into the Roman Empire and beyond'.[48] In the same vein as Ahl, Pernot persuasively argues that the issue of figured speech is, indeed, a vital one in Greek and Roman literature.[49] Pernot's recent expansive study *The Subtle Subtext: Hidden Meanings in Literature and Life* reconnoitres 'the world of the subtext'.[50]

Therefore, my study embraces the hermeneutic approach that scholars have named 'hermeneutics of suspicion' or 'paranoid reading'. The first expression is coined by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur in 1965 to describe the joint methodology underneath the works of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.[51] The second expression is referred to by Sedgwick, who alongside Felski, has more recently contended that this suspicious approach to reading texts, which may encapsulate a hidden meaning, is typical of the majority of modern literary criticism.[52] Many scholars have applied this approach to classical texts, which present praise and celebratory tones towards power.[53] The genre of praise itself often induces the audience to embrace suspicious reading. As Hall discusses in his book on politeness and politics in Cicero, sometimes it becomes difficult to discern if praise is genuinely sincere or not, particularly when addressed to those of towering status.[54] Encomia between associates and peers are accepted as a demonstration of encouragement and commonality but when significant disparity and difference in status looms, similar encomia could be interpreted as part of strategies to play politics. Gunderson has recently drawn attention to the uncomfortable connection between power and poetry and the significance of praise in Martial's epigrams and Statius' *Silvae*. As Gunderson argues 'there is no obvious way to talk about the relationship between poetry and power in this age that does not at once get complicated and then more complicated still: the question of power is protean'.[55] Imperial praise is the product of this complicated relationship.

Suspicion and paranoia seem to be the unavoidable result of this political environment. Living at the imperial court is extremely dangerous not only because people are constantly scrutinized, but also because communication is enormously difficult: courtiers must speak to the *princeps* without abject flattery or, at the opposite extreme, outrageous frankness, or without stooping to *adulatio* or *contumacia*.[56] In other words, Seneca and his peers should eschew profitable flattery and turn instead to a wary posture in order to establish a 'dialogue' with the emperor. Nevertheless, de facto, as we will see, they are compelled to flatter the powerful. It would be unimaginable to say *apertis verbis* something against

[48] Ahl (1984, 174). [49] Cf. Pernot (2007; 2020). [50] Pernot (2021, viii).
[51] Cf. Ricoeur (1965). [52] Cf. Sedgwick (2003b); Felski (2012).
[53] For a paranoid reading applied to the *Naturales quaestiones*, see Graf (2023).
[54] Cf. Hall (2009, 78–106). [55] Gunderson (2021, 4). [56] Cf. Ahl (1984).

the emperor, who always wants to receive praise and encomium.[57] Seneca and other imperial writers who allude to contemporary politics face challenges and strict constraints. Flattery is, therefore, the only weapon or—to borrow a phrase from one of Scott's books by the same title[58]—'the weapon of the weak' to interact with those who attain power in the Imperial age, especially under Julio-Claudian emperors, when it was unthinkable and dangerous to criticize the emperor openly. Apart from a few exceptions—for example, the Stoic senator Thrasea Paetus, who, having heard Nero read the exculpating letter penned by Seneca, left the Curia to protest against the matricide and denounced Nero for the murder of Agrippina, while other senators celebrated Nero's matricide with a vote of thanks[59]—a climate of unrestrained flattery reverberates through the imperial court. It is significant that Seneca himself, despite Nero's refusal to allow him to retire in 62, observes the etiquette of the court and thanks Nero.[60]

My purpose is to explore how Seneca theorizes flattery in light of the double-speak theory, and to analyse several examples of flattery in his texts, particularly in the historical *exempla* which play a key role in ancient Roman culture.[61] Romans are passionate users of *exempla* and recognize their pivotal role in modelling Roman society by activating cultural memory and providing paradigms to emulate or avoid. Recent scholarship emphasizes the relevance of *exempla* in Roman culture and, especially, in Seneca's philosophical works (cf. below, 3.1). My aim in this book is to articulate a model for understanding the rhetorical and moral operations of Seneca's exemplarity in relation to flattery. To this end, I examine a series of individual exemplary performers (below, Chapter 4), reported in the *De ira*, seeking to explain how Seneca deploys them in persuasive rhetoric and instantiates them as a model for interaction with the emperor by underlining the contradictory political and ethical implications. Indeed, in these cases we may spot a discrepancy between the political dimension and the ethical one of Seneca's exemplarity: the author frequently makes a positive evaluation in the former category, and a negative one in the latter. This might disorientate the reader and jeopardize the recognition of the *exemplum* as offering a model. Seneca's complex dynamics of exemplarity thus tend towards accepting *exempla* that in historical actuality, under specific political circumstances, are exemplary, even if they do not correspond to contemporary ethical principles. I consider how and why Seneca, who was generally concerned with the ethical dimension of exemplarity as befits a moral philosopher, applies the category of exemplarity to some flatterers. To that

[57] Cf. Rudich (1997, 15–16). [58] Scott (2008).

[59] Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 14.12.1. On Thrasea Paetus as an opponent of Nero cf. *Ann.* 13.49.1; 14.48–49; 15.20; 15.23; 16.21–35.

[60] Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 14.56.3: *Seneca, qui finis omnium cum dominante sermonum, grates agit.*

[61] Valerius Maximus' *Facta et dicta memorabilia* offers the most significant existing evidence about Roman *exempla*.

end, I examine the political context in which exemplary flatterers are invoked and elucidate their role in the practice of flattery adumbrated by Seneca.

The relevance of *exempla* also emerges from Seneca's *modus adulandi*: in the *Ad Polybium*, Seneca refers to previous *exempla* of notable men who lost their brothers: it is Claudius himself who presents Polybius with *exempla* from the imperial family. The selection of *exempla* operated by Seneca and attributed to Claudius even utilizes a flattering device to flatter Claudius himself, the final *exemplum* provided by Seneca to Polybius (below, Chapter 3). The rhetoric of exemplarity plays an important role also in *De clementia*, where Seneca praises Nero inviting him to be an *exemplar* for his citizens by outdoing his predecessors, including Augustus, the model par excellence (below, Chapter 6).

The question of whether Seneca is 'sincere' or not is, therefore, less relevant. We should change the perspective and, instead of passing judgement on the degree of his sincerity in praising the *princeps*, investigate the strategies with which imperial authors, including Seneca, address the emperor.

I.5 Book Plan

I close this introductory chapter with an outline of the book as a whole. Although Seneca advises us to begin our arguments by displaying precepts and then end by using examples, I deviate from his instructions and indeed do the exact opposite.[62] Instead of beginning with the theory of adulation, I choose to start with the *Ad Polybium*, as a practical application of a theory of flattery, and to conclude with the *Naturales quaestiones*, in which Seneca himself defines the flatterer. Pursuing this strategy, I nevertheless follow Seneca, to the extent that he composed a work of blatant adulation (*Consolatio ad Polybium*) and only theorized flattery in his last work (*Naturales quaestiones*).

A significant part of this book focuses on the *Consolatio ad Polybium*, discussed in Chapters 1–3. While suffering his *relegatio* at the boundaries of the Empire, Seneca composes his most compromising œuvre which placed a sharp weapon in his detractors' hands since it was imbued with the grossest adulation. Indeed, Seneca makes a clear plea to be recalled from Corsica, garnishing his work with flamboyant flattery of the emperor and his freedman. The panegyric of Claudius here is quite remarkable; it is now a matter of virtual consensus that this consolation was not devised merely to cheer up Polybius. A huge amount has been written on the extent to which Seneca gushes over Claudius, on how Seneca's political audacity contradicts Stoic precepts, and how, by parodying Claudius in the *Apocolocyntosis*, Seneca is decrying his earlier flattery of Claudius in the

[62] *Ad Marc.* 2.1: *scio a praeceptis incipere omnis qui monere aliquem volunt, in exemplis desinere.*

consolation to Polybius.[63] Yet the *Apocolocyntosis* itself should also be read as a work primarily devised to flatter Nero: by vilifying the dead emperor, Seneca can ingratiate himself with the new one. Indeed, the startling contrast between references to Claudius in the two different works is undeniable, just as the lapse of consistency is patent and has been taken as primary evidence for charging Seneca with duplicity and flattery. I will not attempt to assert the intellectual honesty of the author in addressing Polybius, and I will dwell neither on the stark contrast, already highlighted by previous scholarship, between this consolation and the later *Apocolocyntosis* nor propose a parallel reading of the two texts.[64] Instead, I would like to focus on the *Ad Polybium* by analysing how Seneca flatters Polybius, which strategies he adopts to appeal to the emperor and, finally, how he praises the *princeps*. While scholars have generally focused on the flattery of Claudius, I want to explore in more detail how Seneca addresses Polybius. Thus, my preliminary question is: why did Seneca choose Polybius among Claudius' freedmen? Polybius was powerful, but not the most influential man at court.[65] Moreover, Polybius was close to Messalina, the main champion of Seneca's exile. Writing to Polybius, Seneca runs the risk of antagonizing Messalina.

In Chapter 1, I propose a new interpretation of the *Consolatio*, illustrating the subtle and unexpected ways in which Seneca absorbed and transformed consolatory topoi, regarding the circumstances, and, above all, the addressees. By adapting Stoic ideas and principles to the recipient, Seneca displays his skill in the psychological shaping of the piece to suit the needs of the addressee. After inspecting how Seneca praises Polybius, I will then analyse the blatant praise of Claudius.

In Chapter 2, exploring the possible link between Polybius and Seneca, I attempt to explain why Seneca chooses to address Polybius among Claudius' freedmen, and not the more powerful Pallas or Narcissus, by focusing on the relevance of literature in the consolation. As part of his stratagem to draw Claudius' attention to his situation, Seneca describes the freedman not only as a zealous imperial functionary but as an outstanding scholar. Rereading Polybius not simply as the material executor of the emperor, but also as an eminent intellectual helps us to acknowledge the great relevance of literary culture in the first century. I will demonstrate that the fusion of these two components in the freedman makes Polybius the right man in the right place, at the right time. By

[63] Momigliano (1932, 137) suggests that the panegyric of Claudius in the *Ad Polybium* is satirical in character; Griffin (1976, 133) considers the *Apocolocyntosis* as a meditative parody of the *Ad Polybium*'s flattery.

[64] For a deep analysis of the connections between *Ad Polybium* and *Apocolocyntosis*, see Rudich (1987). Suggesting a textual relationship between the *Apocolocyntosis* and the *Ad Polybium*, Rudich (1997, 40ff.) identifies elements of self-parody employed by Seneca to neutralize the sycophancy permeating the consolation.

[65] Cf. Suet. *Claud.* 28 with Guastella (1999, 192–195); Hurley (2001, 192–195). D.C. 61.30.6[b] identifies Callistus, Narcissus, and Pallas as the freedmen who divided the power among themselves.

exploiting the intellectual nature of Polybius Seneca creates a strong bond between himself and his formal addressee. I will focus on Seneca's depiction of Polybius as a highly cultured freedman, who has to celebrate Claudius' *res gestae* and then, turn to a less demanding literary genre. I will show that the omission of Phaedrus opens up a complex operation of censorship, which has considerable social and political repercussions.

Like the first two chapters, Chapter 3 focuses on the *Consolatio ad Polybium* by analysing the last chapters of this consolation. At the end of this consolation, after having instructed Polybius to check his pain through *praecepta*, Seneca displays a series of *exempla.* I propose a new interpretation of the presence of Claudius in this consolation. According to traditional scholarship, the presence of *Claudius*, called to take over the role of the *consolator*, should be read as another attempt to flatter him. Instead, I will draw out a subversive meaning in the presence of the ruler by focusing on the words which Seneca uses to describe the emperor: *tenacissima memoria* and *adsueta sibi facundia*, in typical Senecan style, betray a veiled meaning, that is not necessarily apparent at first reading.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the external manifestations of *adulatio.* In this chapter, I analyse some historical *exempla* from the second and third books of the *De ira* in which and by which it is possible to shed light on the question of flattery. All *exempla* in this chapter have to do with the intellectual's relationship to power. I set out to focus in this chapter on the *De ira* as some *exempla* there, even if they belong to a distant past, can be set in dialogue with the current *exempla* at the imperial court.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the concept of *simplicitas* as the very opposite of flattery and its evolution in the passage from Republic into Empire. In his work, Seneca seems to mourn the old *simplicitas* and often draws on daily life to show how frequently men need to simulate and/or dissimulate their feelings not only in front of power but also in front of ordinary people. At the core of the chapter, I discuss a passage from the *De tranquillitate animi* where Seneca introduces the figure of Iulius Canus, who, differently from the courtiers analysed in Chapter 4, does not flatter the ruler. Not only does Canus not put on any mask, but Seneca presents him as a prefiguration of the wise man who engages in necessary confrontation with the tyrant. I will show how Seneca reuses and adapts philosophical and rhetorical topos in portraying Canus.

Chapter 6 focuses on *De clementia* and explores the multiple strategies adopted by Seneca to address the young emperor Nero. Finally, returning to Rome in 49, Seneca had to tutor Nero, who took over as *princeps* after Claudius died in 54. Being the only Senecan work directly addressed to the Roman emperor, I consider *De clementia* as another text in which *adulatio* is put into practice, despite Seneca's explicit denial of flattery.

Chapter 7 looks at Seneca's *Letters*, by offering an overview of flattery from Seneca's *Letters* addressed to Lucilius. In this chapter, I elucidate the extent to

which a fragmented but significant theory of adulation can emerge across Seneca's *Letters*. Although Seneca does not devote any letter to a systematic analysis of flattery, several letters offer fragmentary insight; in this chapter, I focus on those letters that can help the reader to sketch out an idea of flattery, before looking at the *Naturales quaestiones*, where finally Seneca theorizes the flatterer.

At the core of Chapter 8 is the preface to book 4a of the *Naturales quaestiones* in which Seneca, by praising Lucilius, the flatterer of Gallio, offers a vivid caricature of the *adulator*. Ostensibly, Seneca defines the *adulator* in the guise of a *vitiosus*, by comparing him with appalling characters in Roman society. In the final section, I discuss how Seneca's portrait of the *adulator* contrasts with the depiction of the *sapiens* and how, ultimately, they share more similarities than we could expect: each is *artifex*, albeit in a different sense, and Seneca subsumes the two types, as being *sapiens* at the imperial court means inevitably playing the role of the flatterer.

The personal practice of flattery displayed in the *Ad Polybium*, as discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 and in *De clementia* (Chapter 6), along with the 'distant' *exempla* of flattery represented by Seneca, considered in Chapters 4 and 6, and with the theorization of adulation, as examined in Chapters 7 and 8, indicates the range and the complexity of flattering strategies during the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Furthermore, I argue, Seneca emerges not only as a practitioner of flattery but also as a theorist of it. While many writers tarnished their reputation by exploiting flattery, Seneca is among the few who not only accepts flattery but also advocates for it as an essential tool in his own times. Although many scholars have dealt with Seneca's flattery from a moralizing perspective—*adulatio* is pernicious tout court—this is not the only way to think about flattery in Seneca. Flattery is also a political issue and should be considered as shaped by the most asymmetric of power relations, that between the *princeps* and the courtier, who should resort to various strategies of flattery, simulation, and dissimulation to cope with power.

Indeed, it is unquestionable that, due to the tight connection of *adulatio* and *(dis)simulatio*, a discussion of how Seneca's theatrical output plays in, especially in the wake of Aygon's volume remarking on the importance of various techniques of illusion and mechanical deception, would have yielded significant results. Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that such a type of analysis could be the subject of another entire book-length study.[66]

[66] Cf. Aygon (2015).

1

Adulatio in Performance

Seneca's *Consolatio ad Polybium*

Maluerim veris offendere quam placere adulando.
Sen. *Clem.* 2.2.2

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will offer neither a commentary on the entire *Consolatio ad Polybium* nor an account of the history of flattery or of Roman consolation.[1] Rather, I would like to propose a new reading strategy for the consolation, illustrating the subtle and unexpected ways in which the Roman philosopher absorbed and transformed consolatory topoi, in reference to contemporary circumstances, and, above all, the addressee, or addressees.[2] In developing an analysis of the poetics and politics of this (often controversial) text, I will be alert to the various types of bias mentioned in the Introduction and to a change in political climate that recognizes Seneca's work as contradictory and flattering.

Seneca composed the *Consolatio ad Polybium* in 43 or 44,[3] from Corsica, where he had been exiled at the end of 41.[4] Seneca omits any obvious reference to the reasons that led to his exile: he must remain discreet because cannot argue his innocence without charging Claudius with injustice.[5] Instead, he counts on the

[1] The most recent commentary on the *Ad Polybium* is Kurth (1994). In the twentieth century, Isleib (1906); Duff (1915); Abel (1967); Ceccarini (1973) wrote commentaries on this consolation. Atkinson (1985, 860–884) summarizes the main issues of the *consolatio*; Degl'Innocenti Pierini (1990) focuses on Ovidian echoes in the consolation.

[2] For the traditional themes of the genre of consolation, cf. Degl'Innocenti Pierini (1990, 218–229); Motto, Clark (1993a, 189–196); Baltussen (2013a); M. Wilson (2013, 98).

[3] Abel (1967, 163) and Ceccarini (1973, 17) suggest that the consolation was composed in the first half of 43, Grimal (1978a, 277) and Lana (1955, 155) propose a later composition: winter 43/4.

[4] Dio Cassius (60.8.5) makes a plausible case for his being an innocent victim of Claudius' young wife, Valeria Messalina, who was envious of Livilla and determined to be rid of her. An important but dubious reference is in the Scholiast on Juvenal 5.109: *sub Claudio quasi conscius adulteriorum Iuliae Germanici filiae in Corsicam relegatus post triennium revocatus est*; cf. Degl'Innocenti Pierini (1990, 134–135). Tacitus is silent, there is only a brief allusion to Seneca's *relegatio* at *Ann.* 12.8.2. Cf. Lana (1955, 106–110); Griffin (1976, 59–62); Grimal (1978a, 90–98); Habinek (2014, 8–10); Braund (2015, 22–24); Burgeon (2018, 15–17).

[5] Cf. Fantham (2007, 176) with Tarrant (1995, 73).

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clemency of the emperor, which in the list of his virtues is pre-eminent, in order to hope to be recalled.[6]

The *Ad Polybium* should be read as a work produced in a context deeply influenced by the rising tide of flattery (*gliscens adulatio*), as Tacitus remarks at the beginning of his *Annales*.[7] Nevertheless, at the same time, it would be mistaken to dismiss this consolation as nothing more than shameful flattery.[8] I will examine other hidden elements which make the consolation a fascinating work in which Seneca conflates unveiled flattery with veiled criticism. Therefore, to better understand Seneca's approach to the emperor in the consolation, I propose we should reread the *Ad Polybium* not only in comparison with other consolatory works written by Seneca—especially the *Consolatio ad Helviam matrem*, composed in the same period during the exile—but also with the so-called literature of exile, especially Cicero's and Ovid's writings. As we shall see, Ovid is a constant model for Seneca's production in exile (below, 1.3).

The dedicatee Polybius is one of Claudius' powerful freedmen, secretary to the emperor as part of his literary work.[9] The name Polybius appears only in this work, and in a passage of the *Apocolocyntosis* that seems to corroborate historian Dio Cassius (60.31.2), who claims that Polybius had a close relationship with Claudius' wife Messalina until she finally turned against him and caused his death.[10]

The *Ad Polybium* goes far beyond its declared purpose of consoling Polybius, embarking instead on a wide-ranging *adulatio* and—if we consider the extant tradition of philosophical reflection of flattery from Plato down to Cicero, Philodemus of Gadara, Seneca, Plutarch, and Epictetus—offering new and fascinating points for a literary-philosophical investigation into flattery.[11] After all, as Degl'Innocenti Pierini notes, *consolatio* often digresses into *laudatio*.[12] According to Sullivan, 'the gross flattery of Polybius himself and of the emperor Claudius go beyond even the generous conventions of Roman eulogy'.[13] To justify the

[6] Cf. *Ad Pol.* 13.2, cf. below (1.4). Cf. *Apocol.* 10, where Seneca denounces Claudius' lack of clemency.

[7] Tac. *Ann.* 1.1.2: *temporibusque Augusti dicendis non defuere decora ingenia, donec gliscente adulatione deterrerentur*; cf. *Agr.* 43.4: *tam caeca et corrupta mens adsiduis adulationibus erat.*

[8] Sauer (2014, 168) reads the consolation as anticipatory of *De clementia*.

[9] Cf. Suet. *Claud.* 28 with Hurley (2001, 193–194). Apparently, from a remark in *Ad Pol.* 6.5 Polybius performed at least to some extent the duties of secretary *a libellis*, who received and classified the petitions addressed to the Emperor, so he is the proper recipient of petitions to Claudius. Cf. Lotito (1974, 290–295); Griffin (1976, 21 n. 2); Degl'Innocenti Pierini (1990, 221 n. 22).

[10] *Apocol.* 13.5: *convolant primi omnium liberti Polybius, Myron, Arpocras, Ampheus, Pheronaotus, quos Claudius omnes, necubi imparatus esset, praemiserat.* Quotations from *Apocolocyntosis* are from Eden's edition (1984).

[11] Plato identifies two types of flattery addressed to the body (cooking and luxurious clothes) and two types directed to the soul (sophistic and rhetoric) in *Grg.* 464c–465e and describes the flatterer in *Phdr.* 240b. Cicero stigmatizes flattery in *De amicitia*, see below (7.2); cf. Plu. *Mor.* 53A–54B.

[12] Cf. Degl'Innocenti Pierini (2000, 339).

[13] Cf. Sullivan (1985, 123).

mismatch between the references to Claudius in the *Ad Polybium* and in *Apocolocyntosis*, some scholars cast doubt on its authorship given the positive depiction of Claudius was hardly compatible with the emperor's portrait in the *Apocolocyntosis.* The question of authenticity, however, was resolved in favour of Senecan authorship, at the beginning of the twentieth century.[14] Other solutions were advanced to solve the apparent inconsistency: Momigliano considered the panegyric to have a satirical character.[15] This idea was then developed by Alexander, who detected a 'profound irony' in Seneca's appeal to Polybius and 'an undercurrent of profound satire' in the whole. According to Alexander, irony was the only tool that he could use to attack the emperor.[16] Some recent scholarship has also tried to exonerate Seneca from accusations of flattery by detecting some elements of irony between the lines: Atkinson holds out for a secondary and ironic meaning.[17] Conversely, Fantham remarks: 'there is no place for irony in the genre of *consolatio*, nor was Seneca's exile as a political suspect the time for such experimentation'.[18]

It is likely that Seneca envisaged this work as a price worth paying to be recalled to Rome; Griffin claims that Seneca would have had to be especially careful not to offend since even eulogy could be misinterpreted by a 'sensitive emperor'.[19] According to Tacitus, when Vipstanus proposed the title of *pater senatus*, Claudius checked the consul's words as taking flattery to excess (*ut nimium adsentantem*).[20] Therefore, Seneca ran the risk of provoking an unintended reaction, and, contrary to his expectations, the consolation did not elicit the desired outcome.[21] Several exiles—as Seneca himself underlines in the *Ad Pol.* 13.3—came home for Claudius' triumph, but not Seneca, who had to wait until Messalina was dead (48) and Agrippina was married to Claudius (49).[22] Tacitus spells out that Seneca was recalled from exile, not through Polybius, but thanks to the removal of the hostile Messalina, who was executed for adultery, and the ascendancy of Agrippina, who recalled Seneca to serve as tutor to her son Nero.[23]

[14] Authenticity was definitively demonstrated by Isleib (1906); cf. Stephanie (1910); Galdi (1928). For an extended discussion of the reasons behind the acceptance or rejection of irony, see Atkinson (1985, 860–864).

[15] Cf. Momigliano (1932, 136–137). Also, Marchesi (1944) and Mazzoli (1968) claimed that this consolation was charged with intentional irony or sarcasm. The first to read the *Ad Polybium* as an ironical piece was Diderot (1779). For the anti-irony position, cf. Dahlmann (1936); Giancotti (1953); Abel (1967, 72); Griffin (1976, 415ff.); Kurth (1994, 21ff.).

[16] Cf. Alexander (1943, 41). [17] Cf. Atkinson (1985). [18] Fantham (2007, 185).

[19] Griffin (1976, 415–416); cf. Giardina (2000, 65).

[20] Tac. *Ann.* 11.25.4; cf. Malloch (2013, 388–389).

[21] Lana (1955, 147–157) defines the *Ad Polybium* 'L'inutile umiliazione'. Cf. Rudich (1997, 35): 'The fact that Seneca had to wait six more years for his recall from exile makes it clear that his strategy in the *Consolatio ad Polybium* backfired. But one can only speculate on the reasons why'.

[22] Cf. Suet. *Claud.* 17.3.

[23] Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 12.8.2. In *Ann.* 12.8.2 Seneca is called *magister*, in *Ann.* 15.62.2 *educator* and *praeceptor.* Dio Cassius (61.10.1) insinuates that Agrippina recalled Seneca because they were lovers.