The ideal reader of Seneca's *Epistle* 1.2

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Abstract

This research aims at considering the image of Lucilius, the recipient of the *Epistulae Morales* by Seneca (1st Century CE). The corpus of our investigation is the first book, and the methodology is based on intertextual approaches. The present paper shall discuss the role of the reader regarding the 2nd letter of the first book (*Ep.* 1.2), where Seneca exposes to Lucilius how the “ideal reader” should be.

Key words:

Epistolography, Seneca, reader.

Introduction

In this research I analyze the importance of the recipient in the first book of the work *Epistulae Morales* by Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BCE - 65 CE). The present paper focuses the second letter of the epistolary. There I investigate both the characterization of Lucilius and Seneca's conception of reader. In order to do this, in the text under appreciation I look for, on the one hand, the mentions to Lucilius and, on the other hand, references to the act of reading itself. As a theoretical foundation, I take into consideration recent approaches in Classics that give importance to the role of the reader in the meaning of texts, such as Intertextual Studies and Classical Reception Studies.

Results and Discussion

From the first epistle it is known already that Lucilius is a Seneca's disciple who reads about philosophy in epistolary format (Braren 1999; Scarpat 1975). In the *Ep.* 1.2 Seneca, referring to a previous letter by Lucilius, firstly praises his general conduct: “You do not run hither and thither and distract yourself by changing your abode; for such restlessness is the sign of a disordered spirit” (*Ep.* 1.2.1, transl. Gummere). But soon we perceive that Seneca talks specifically about the act of reading. According to him people who read many authors at the same time do not really apprehend anything (*Ep.* 1.2.2); and here Seneca compares bad habits of reading with those of travelers whose ties of hospitality are numerous but have no friendship (*Ep.* 1.2.2). Seneca praises those readers who have the healthy habit of reading some few authors and meditate on them (*Certis ingeniis inmorari et innutrir oportet, si uelis aliquid trahere quod in animo fideliter sedeat, Ep.* 1.2.2). He illustrates his reasoning by *sententiae* and by further metaphors, that equal the act of reading with the process of digestion, the treatment of diseases, human relationships or planting (*non conualescit planta quae saepe transfertur, Ep.* 1.2.3). The “ideal reader” should not have more books than he can read (*Ep.* 1.2.3), and must choose the best ones (*probatos, Ep.* 1.2.4). The act of reading must be useful: “Each day acquire something that will fortify you against poverty, against death, indeed against other misfortunes

as well” (*Ep.* 1.2.5, transl. Gummere). Then Seneca's precept that learning from reading requires selection and critical reflection is illustrated by a personal example. After quoting a saying he collected during his own reading of Epicure (“Contented poverty is an honourable estate”, *Ep.* 1.2.5, transl. Gummere), Seneca questions its consistency and the concepts there involved (*Ep.* 1.2.6), letting his (ideal?) reader thinking on what does poverty and richness could really mean.

Conclusions

From Seneca's writing we are able to draw some aspects of his addressee. The first sentences of *Ep.* 1.2 present Lucilius as having a spirit that tends to be focused and reflexive. The letter also indicates that, besides writing and reading Seneca's epistles, the disciple reads also other authors and probably other genres of literature. My analysis of Seneca's rhetorical strategies in this letter (e.g. his use of *captatio beneuolentiae*, metaphors, *sententiae* and personal examples) evinces that the image of the named addressee has an important function in the constitution of the epistolary. No matter if he was real or not, the Lucilius-reader-of-letters ultimately reflects and directs in some way every reader, including the modern one, who decides to read the philosopher's work. Realizing this function reinforces my hypothesis that a closer observation of the vestiges of Lucilius in the *Epistulae Morales* can aid in the understanding of the work, such as in addressing the problematic lack of systematicity of the Senecan text (discussed e.g. by De Pietro 2013; Silveira 2014).

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