

# "Drunkenness is Nothing Less than Wilful Insanity": Seneca's *Sententiae*

by R.A. Faber

Lucius Annaeus Seneca ( c. 4 BC - AD 65) is remembered especially as the advisor to the emperor Nero and as moral philosopher. Yet he occupies an important place also in the history of prose writing. Now it must be said immediately that Seneca's style - in both poetry and prose - has earned him much criticism, especially in the last one hundred and fifty years. The highly rhetorical quality of his writing and its apparently undisciplined nature have been the object of much scorn. In fact, already in antiquity Seneca's style, particularly in comparison with that of Cicero, was considered unsuccessful; some even charged Seneca with causing the demise of fine Latin writing.

One of the remarkable features of Seneca's style is the *sententia*. A *sententia* is a carefully finished expression of a thought. It is a brief, pithy sentence pregnant with meaning. Any striking thought pithily conveyed may be called *sententia*, though often the saying is of general application beyond its immediate context. *Sententiae* occur in all periods of Latin literature, in both prose and poetry. They are not unrelated to the Greek *gnomai*, which are general propositions or proverbial expressions of opinion. *Sententiae* were used sparingly in classical and pre-classical Latin; it is during the first century AD that employment of them increases. From Cicero's perspective the over-use of *sententiae* indicated a lack of control, and reflected an undisciplined, perhaps youthful desire to make a point by brilliance rather than by truth.

The poet Ovid, whose works influenced Seneca in some of his writing, uses *sententiae* to express unexpected thoughts, or thoughts that would be unusual in any context except the ones in which they occur. To give but one example of this type of *sententia*, consider a line in the story of Narcissus, who discovers that he is in love with his own reflection; the poet has him say: "I would that my lover and I were separated" (*Metamorphoses* 3. 467)!

It is due in part to the influence of the schools of rhetoric in the late-Augustan period and thereafter that the *sententiae* became so popular. The popularity of public speaking also affected literary styles. The occurrence of *sententiae* increases throughout poetry and prose of the first century AD. The epic poetry of Lucan, for example, was noted for its use of the pointed, epigrammatic statement. Yet it was Seneca who became famous, if not notorious, for the use of *sententiae*.

Seneca's style of writing may be described as non-periodic and loose. Unlike Cicero, Seneca composed sentences that aimed at immediate impact rather than at full and complete expression. Often the structure of a Senecan sentence is abrupt, or loose. Instead of an involved and lengthy Ciceronian period, the Senecan sentence is brilliant and sharp. Rhetorical devices are employed to create a direct effect. The use of *sententiae* contributes to this immediate impact. The result is that the sentence may lack the qualities of majesty and dignity that are associated with Cicero's style; on the other hand, Seneca's sentences are neat and witty. The pointed style avoids stating the obvious, and prefers instead to aim at being ingenious.

Seneca's *sententiae* are marked by antithesis of thought or language, so that the process of reading is arrested by the striking collocation of ideas or words. Often

alliteration or *homoiooteleuton* (word-endings of similar sound) enhance the *sententia*. Expected word order is replaced by effective arrangement; parallelism of elements not normally combined results in unexpected meaning. Thus the *sententiae* lend the writing a charged quality, a quality of power and significance. What a *sententia* may lack in originality of thought, it gains in ability to be applied universally. Seneca sometimes places *sententiae* at the end of a line of reasoning, as if to cap and complete the progress of the thought with a maxim. In such cases, the *sententia* has a final, conclusive quality. At other times he sprinkles *sententiae* throughout the development of an argument for the sake of variety or illustration; thus it causes the reader to stop and contemplate the rich meaning of the pithy proverb.

In one of his many letters Seneca treats the topic of the condition of elderly people. Contrary to popular belief, he states, the elderly are not deprived of pleasure so dear to the younger generation. To make the point that those who are advanced in years have reached a stage in life at which a different type of pleasure operates, he writes: "To need no pleasure is itself a pleasure" (Epistle 12.5). Older folks often realize that they have no need, anymore, to pursue particular means of satisfaction; this realization is itself a pleasant discovery. By means of the *sententia*, then, Seneca illustrates his observation. In another letter, Seneca makes the point that "many people who inspire fear are themselves subject to it" (Epistle 14.10). Here, as in many other places, Seneca employs a *sententia* to state a truth about ethical behaviour. Often Seneca's *sententiae* are statements of truth about human nature in general. Many of such epigrammatic pronouncements have a proverbial quality. In the satirical work, *Apocolocyntosis*, ascribed to Seneca's authorship, there are several proverbs - a phenomenon common to both ancient and modern satirical writings. One memorable *sententia* is "a cock is master only of his own dunghill" (*Apocolocyntosis* 7.3). I'll leave it to the reader to interpret and apply this proverb for himself.

Some of Seneca's *sententiae* apply only to a particular person, or a particular type of person. In the philosophical treatise, *On the Brevity of Life*, Seneca makes a very pithy assessment of Cicero's tendency to praise his own consulship. He writes that Cicero praised his public role "not without cause, but without end" (*On the Brevity of Life*, 5.1)! Other *sententiae*, however, are applicable to all human beings equally. In *On the constancy of the Wise* (17.2) Seneca reminds us that "no one is laughable who can laugh at himself". Such practical moralizing made Seneca famous. Yet, as I stated at the outset, Seneca's generous use of *sententiae* was not appreciated by all, and it earned him the tag of being "sententious". It is ironic that Seneca himself knows the value of the maxim: it should contribute to the overall structural effect of a work. He writes: "the author's skill is intertwined in every line - and nothing from the tapestry can be removed without doing damage to the whole" (Epistle 33.5). To that advice we may respond, in conclusion: "the measure you give will be the measure you get."