

Seneca on old age

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... *nemo tam senex est, ut improbe unum diem speret.*

—SENECA, *Ep.* 12.6¹

(...no one is so old, that it would be wrong for him to hope for one more day of life.)

RESUMEN

Séneca, a diferencia de Cicerón, no escribió un tratado acerca de la vejez pero hizo muchas referencias a este tópico en sus obras. Con un profundo conocimiento psicológico y pathos conmovedor, trata ardentemente de enseñar a los hombres cómo prepararse para la vejez e incluso cómo obtener placer de ella. El buen consejo de Séneca, aplicable a los jóvenes y a los viejos, su ingenio y su buen humor —incluso bromeando acerca de su propia vejez— introducen distensión en la gravedad de este tema.

SUMMARY

Seneca, unlike Cicero, wrote no specific work on Old Age but makes many references in his writings to this topic. With deep psychological understanding and moving pathos, he ardently strives to teach his fellow-men how to prepare for old age and even how to derive pleasure from it. Seneca's sound advice, applicable to young and old alike, his wit and good humor—even jesting about his own old age—lighten the gravity of the subject.

¹ Cf. Cicero, *De Senectute* 7.24: *Nemo enim est tam senex, qui se annum non putet posse vivere.* (For no one is so old that he does not think he can live one year more.) All translations are my own.

Although Seneca wrote no specific treatise on old age comparable to Cicero's *De Senectute*, yet the pages of this philosopher of the Neronian Age are replete with references, analyses, and psychological insights regarding this topic, so significant and so pertinent to man's life². With deep understanding of the human psyche, with touching pathos and genuine sentiment for his fellow men, Seneca endeavors to teach us how to prepare for old age, how to endure it, and even how to enjoy it.

He certainly does recognize the many hardships that old age frequently inflicts upon human beings and acknowledges the disadvantages that have been traditionally assigned to this period of life. He repeatedly reminds us that old age is inevitable («*Huic uni intercedi non potest*»³ —«It alone can have no intercessor»), that nothing can withstand it,⁴ that at times it resembles a crumbling building on the verge of collapsing or a leaking ship about to sink; in the words of Vergil, that greatest of bards, it is an incurable, pale, and bitter disease,⁶ often making the elderly irascible and querulous.⁷ Moreover, a standard cliché describing old age is that the follies of children appear again, that it is, in fact, a second childhood.⁸ Still another accusation is that old age is sluggish, set in its ways, unwilling to make any changes.⁹

OLD-AGE, a *second Child*, by Nature curs'd
With more and greater evils than the first,
Weak, sickly, full of pains; in ev'ry breath
Railing at life, and yet afraid of death...¹⁰

Yet in spite of these charges *contra senectutem*, we should neither dread nor fear that period of time in our life. Old age should neither be craved nor refused.

² For a collection of Senecan passages dealing with old age and related topics, see F. De Caria, ed., *Il Problema della vecchiaia* (Roma 1977). This volume contains an introduction, Latin text with Italian translation on facing pages, critical and exegetical notes, and a brief bibliography.

³ *Ep.* 30.4; see also 30.10.

⁴ *Ep.* 31.10; 71.13.

⁵ *Ep.* 30.2.

⁶ *Ep.* 108.28-29.

⁷ *De Ira.* 1.13.5; 2.19.4; 3.9.4.

⁸ *Ep.* 4.2; 99.10; *De Tranq. An.* 3.8; *De Cons. Sap.* 12.1-3.

⁹ *De Tranq. An.* 2.6.

¹⁰ «Gotham.» Pt. I, lines 215-218, in *The Poetical Works of Charles Churchill*, ed. Douglas Grant (Oxford 1956), p. 298.

Those who are poorly-trained or ill-prepared will be unable to cope, as Cicero sardonically observed, with *any* period of life:

*Quibus enim nihil est in ipsis opis ad bene beateque
vivendum, eis omnis aetas gravis est...*¹¹

(For those who have no resources within themselves for living well and happily, every age is oppressive.)

And, as Seneca explains, the man who has led a virtuous life, who has performed good deeds, will encounter much less difficulty growing old.

*Lucundum est secum esse quam diutissime, cum quis
se dignum, quo frueretur, effecit.*

(*Ep.* 58.32)

(It is pleasant to be with oneself as long as possible when one has made himself worth-while.)

And it should be noted that neither for men nor for animals is there any definite point of time that marks old age; rather, it is a condition that descends upon different individuals at different times in their life.¹² At what point old age strikes a human being is often largely dependent upon the past and present physical and mental health of the individual. Those endowed with basically sound constitutions from an early age and who have not abused their body or their mind by vices and excess usually glide into old age with comfort and ease, continuing to pursue their accustomed interests and activities.

Potest frugalitas producere senectutem...

(*Ep.* 58.32)

(Frugality can extend old age...)

¹¹ *De Senectute* 2.4.

¹² *Ad Marc.* 21.4.

Just as Providence protracts the life of the world, so we can prolong our life by our own providence

*... si voluptates, quibus pars maior perit,
potuerimus regere et coercere. Plato ipse ad
senectutem se diligentia protulit. ... parsimonia ... et
eorum, quae aviditatem evocant, modus et diligens
sui tutela perduxit illum ad senectutem ... annum
unum atque octogensimum inplevit ...*

(Ep. 58.29-31)

(... if we are able to regulate and restrain pleasures that destroy the larger part of mankind. By diligence, Plato himself lived to a ripe old age...his frugality and his curtailment of desires conducted him to his eighty-first year ...)

In fact, when one retains *mens sana in corpore sano*, old age is a blessing. It is not the dregs of life but rather the portion that is crystal clear.¹³

Those, however, who throughout their life have wasted their time, who have indulged in empty, meaningless pursuits, who have made no preparation for old age, come to it unprepared and unarmed (*imparati inermesque*). Seneca sarcastically designates them the *occupati*, those who are busy about nothing.¹⁴

*Quorum puerilis adhuc animos senectus
opprimit...subito in illam necopinantes inciderunt,
accedere eam cotidie non sentiebant.
Quemadmodum aut sermo aut lectio aut aliqua
intentior cogitatio iter facientis decipit et
pervenisse ante sentiunt quam adpropinquasse, sic
hoc iter vitae adsiduum et citatissimum...occupatis
non apparet nisi in fine.*

(De Brev. Vit. 9.4-5)

¹³ Ep. 58.33.

¹⁴ For further discussion of the *occupati* and wasters of time, see A. L. Motto and J.R. Clark, «Hic Situs Est: Seneca on the Deadliness of Idleness», CW 72 (1978-1979) 207-215, and «Tempus omnia rapit: Seneca on the Rapacity of Time,» CFC 21 (1988) 129-138.

(Old age overwhelms their minds that are still childish...; suddenly, unexpectedly, it has caught them off-guard; they did not recognize from day to day that it was coming. Just as travellers busy talking, reading, or musing arrive at their destination sooner than expected, so with life's ceaseless and most speedy journey; the *occupati* don't notice until it's all over.)

Those, however, who have led an orderly, meaningful, and careful life with attention paid to every step on life's path can derive benefits and even pleasure from their later years.

In fact, because Seneca knows all the commonplace objections and the public's general aversion to growing old, he deliberately exaggerates these benefits. When he posits, as we have already noted, that one's «golden» years were not the dregs but the clearest and purest part of life (*Ep.* 58.33), he is apt to surprise his reader by the extent of his homage: his metaphor compares old age with a cup of wine —declaring the aged and well-preserved to be full-bodied, of especial value and relish. Surely this extravagant laudation will startle his audience. In praising old age, Seneca is here employing paradox, a device he frequently resorts to when dealing with unsavory topics, such as poverty, adversity, ill-fortune, and death. In doing so, he assuredly utilizes a strain of wit of which he is clearly fond, but, at the same time, he is also serious and in earnest. Indeed, that very mixture of *gravitas* and levity —termed *spoudaiogeloion*— is a striking feature of his thought. And, to be sure, there is method in this extravagance. As Aldous Huxley once remarked, the very fact that readers are easily «shocked»

...practically imposes it as a duty upon the writer to go on shocking them.¹⁵

Director Peter Brook explains:

«I never use shock for its own sake, but to lift an audience out of its passive acceptance.»¹⁶

¹⁵ «Vulgarity in Literature», *Collected Essays* (New York 1959), p. 110.

¹⁶ Quoted in T. Prideaux, «Stage, Screen and Opera-Director Peter Brook is Master of the Daring and Bizarre», *People*, June 16, 1980, p. 108.

Satiric shocks and paradoxes jolt the lazy reader, forcing him to be more alert.¹⁷

With just such intentions in mind does Seneca assault our complacency and our habitual opinions.

*Complectamur illam [senectutem] et amemus;
plena est voluptatis, si illa scias uti. Gratissima sunt
poma, cum fugiunt; pueritiae maximus in exitu
decor est; deditos vino potio extrema delectat, illa
quae mergit, quae ebrietati summam manum
imponit. Quod in se iucundissimum omnis voluptas
habet, in finem sui differt. Iucundissima est aetas
devexa. ... Et illam quoque in extrema tegula
stantem iudico habere suas voluptates.*

(*Ep.* 12.4-6)

(Let us embrace old age and love it; it is full of pleasure, if you know how to use it. Fruits are most gratifying at the end of their season; youth is most charming when coming to an end; the last drink delights the alcoholic—the drink which souses him, that which puts the finishing touch on his drunkenness. Every pleasure withholds until the end its greatest delight. Life is most pleasing when declining.... And I judge that that age standing on the edge of the roof also has its pleasures.)

With greater exaggeration, Seneca claims that even if old age eliminates all of our pleasures, that fact in itself constitutes a new pleasure! (*Aut hoc ipsum succedit in locum voluptatum, nullis egere,* “*Ep.* 12.5).

Thereafter, Seneca adds considerably to his growing list of the «benefits» of senescence. Old age thankfully frees a man slowly from life, giving him peace and tranquillity:

¹⁷ On the topic of «Satiric Shock» consult J.W. Nichols, *Insinuation. The Tactics of English Satire* (The Hague and Paris 1971), pp. 38-48.

*...o ne illum agere gratias dis omnibus decet, quod
satiatus ad requiem homini necessariam, lasso
gratam perductus est.*

(*Ep.* 30.12)

(...O it is truly fitting that he give thanks to all the gods because, satiated, he has been led to a rest so necessary to mankind, so welcome to the weary.)

In addition, because one suffers increasingly, old age improves upon one's bravery.¹⁸ Further, because one is so near to death, old age allows one to be less concerned with self-preservation.¹⁹ Another clear gain: one's sins are lessened because, in old age, one loses the capacity to sin:

vitia et vitiorum ministeria senuerunt ...

(*Ep.* 26.2)

(His vices and their accoutrements have aged...)

Hence, one is less agitated, less vicious.

However, although the body might be deteriorating, the mind can, in the elderly, retain its vigor; and, indeed, because the body is less clamorous and demanding, the mind is freer than it has ever been before.²⁰ Therefore, one's senior, one's last years are the best time of life to engage in intellectual pursuits—precisely because one is less beset by the hardihood, the heats, and the lusts of youth:

*...iam despumavit. Iam vitia primo fervore
adulescentiae indomita lassavit...*

(*Ep.* 68.13)

(...the foam is now removed. Now the uncontrollable vices of youth's first fervor are exhausted...)

¹⁸ *Ep.* 104.2.

¹⁹ *Ep.* 104.4.

²⁰ *Ep.* 26.2-3.

Any sensible reader will be given serious pause by this so-called compilation of «advantages.» For, between the lines are conveyed a good deal of bad news: one gains in tranquillity because one is increasingly numbed and fading away; one perforce must acquire stamina because pains and ailments so considerably increase; and one need not be overly-concerned with staying alive— simply because one is so dangerously near to extinction! One may well hesitate to embrace these supposed goods.

Thereafter, Seneca offers some of his more disturbing propositions —ones more far-reaching in their implications. He claims that old men finally conquer numerous vices— simply because they lose the ability to commit these vices. By an irony, the loss of physical capacities virtually forces an old man to use his mind.

...quisquis senex ad sapientiam pervenit, annis
pervenit.

(*Ep.* 68.14)

(...whoever as a senex has come to wisdom, has
reached it by aging.)

By so arguing, Seneca appears to run afoul of the major tenets of Stoic thought. The *proficiens*, man struggling along the road of life toward wisdom, was supposed to attain to the status of the *sapiens* only after incredible feats of endeavor and stress. He had to discipline and suppress his major vices. In short, he was (if ever) to acquire wisdom only after years of study and effort.

But here, Seneca reverses this entire tradition: the old man, simply *because* of his debilities, is freed of his vices, and, because his body is becoming increasingly enfeebled, he is of necessity forced more and more to use his mind. It would almost appear that, if the *senex* merely lived long enough, he would, willy-nilly, stumble into wisdom and intellect with hardly an iota of effort. This proves to be Seneca's most outrageous «benefit» that the senior citizen acquires: if he can survive long enough, he'll become wise. It is just like Seneca to posit so many annoying and unsettling theses.

In light of his many ploys, contradictions, and paradoxes concerning this topic, it is of interest to consider Seneca's attitude toward his own old age. We should recall that he wrote the *Epistulae Morales* at the end of his life, when he was in his sixties, and that most of the references to this subject occur within the pages of this *magnum opus*.

In discussing old age, Seneca resorts to the employment of humor and wit which he uses elsewhere too when dealing with serious matters. He even utilizes self-mockery as a strategy to lighten the heaviness of certain topics.

*...si quando fatuo delectari volo, non est mihi longe
quaerendus; me rideo.*

(Ep. 50.2)

(...if at any time I want to be amused by a fool, I
don't have to look very far; I laugh at myself.)

Seneca is certainly not the stodgy philosopher filled with pomp and self-importance. In another letter, he paradoxically alludes to his old age as if it were a port that he had already sailed past.

*Modo dicebam tibi, in conspectu esse me senectutis;
iam vereor, ne senectutem post me reliquerim.*

(Ep. 26.1)

(I was just now telling you that I was in sight of old
age; now I fear that I have left old age behind.)

And elsewhere, he sarcastically expresses gratitude to old age for his illnesses:

*Itaque maior pars in vestimentis degitur. Ago
gratias senectuti, quod me lectulo adfixit.*

(Ep. 67.2)

(And so I spend most of my time all wrapped up. I
give thanks to old age for confining me to my bed.)

But the most protracted scene of ludicrous comedy of this kind occurs in *Epistle 12*. There, he recalls visiting his country villa after a considerable absence. It had been in his childhood a favorite haunt, but now he tells Lucilius that he is shocked at discovering that the orchards are withering and the very stones of the villa crumbling with decay. Over-reacting, he reprimands his *vilicus* for gross negligence —accusing him of allowing the entire estate to fall into disarray. But the steward succinctly reminds Seneca that this state of affairs had no-

thing whatsoever to do with his ineptitude or failure as a grounds-keeper: the entire villa, he patiently explains, was old. Seneca is brought up short: he and his villa are of about the same age —and it is comically brought home to him that both are aged and falling down together. Still emotionally overwrought, Seneca points to an ancient figure lurking in the doorway, curtly and insultingly inquiring who the old decrepit dotard was. He is informed that that man was his own pet slave, his *deliciosus* of years ago who is now toothless and decrepit. That this poor, doddering slave is named *Felicio* constitutes but one further, stinging irony.

Although Seneca from time to time lightens the onus of old age by wit and humor, nevertheless he is well aware that this subject is no laughing matter. The illnesses of his earlier years (general ill-health, fever, asthma, catarrh, possibly tuberculosis)²¹ were exacerbated by age. His constitution seems to have weakened; he is more sensitive to chills, tires more easily, and is forced to abandon some of his daily exercises, such as bathing in cold water and running long distances. He spends most of his day reading, briefly napping, and dining upon light fare.²² He sadly remarks that his later years seem to go by more rapidly. He had always been sensitive to time's rapid transit,²³ but he is even more so now.

*Non solebat mihi tam velox tempus videri: nunc
incredibilis cursus apparet...*

(*Ep.* 49.4)

(Time did not use to seem to pass so swiftly; now
its velocity appears incredible....)

Thus he is compelled to contemplate life's end more closely than ever before. He writes:

*Id ago, ut mihi instar totius vitae dies sit. Nec
mehercules tamquam ultimum rapio sed sic illum
aspicio, tamquam esse vel ultimus possit.*

(*Ep.* 61.1-2)

²¹ *Ep.* 61.1; 65.1; 104.1; 54.1-3, 6; 78.1-4.

²² *Ep.* 67.1-2; 83.5-6.

²³ On time, consult A.L. Motto and J.R. Clark, «Tempus omnia rapit» (above, n. 14); and «Time in Seneca: Past, Present, Future», *Emerita* 53.1 (1987) 31-41.

(I am paying attention to this: every day should resemble an entire lifetime. Nor, by Hercules, am I seizing each day as if it were the last, but I look upon it as if it could be the last.)

Such advice is applicable to young and old alike, for we are not summoned by Fate from a list that includes only senior citizens.²⁴ All of life should be a well-planned journey with careful attention paid to one's body and one's mind. Those who, from an early age on, have cultivated their mind, who have performed good deeds, who have fortified and nourished their soul, are more prepared to confront life's problems stoically and with greater ease. They not only know how to accept old age but even how to enjoy it.

One of the distinct blessings of old age for Seneca was the fact that his mind retained its lucidity and creative vigor.

Gratias...ago: non sentio in animo aetatis iniuriam, cum sentiam in corpore. ... viget animus et gaudet. ... Exultat et mihi facit controversiam de senectute. Hunc ait esse florem suum.
(Ep. 26.2)

(I am thankful; I do not feel that age has impaired my mind, although I do feel that it has taken its toll on my body....my mind is strong and cheerful.... It exults and disputes with me about old age, proclaiming old age to be the period of the mind's flowering.)

Hence old age offers leisure time for meaningful intellectual pursuits.

Quod facere solent, qui serius exierunt et volunt tempus celeritate reparare, calcar addamus; haec aetas optime facit ad haec studia...
(Ep. 68.13)²⁵

²⁴ Ep. 12.6: *non enim citamur ex censu.*

²⁵ See also *NQ* 3.Prol.1-4.

(Let us do what they are accustomed to do who have a late start and want to make up for lost time- let us add a spur; this period of life is well-suited to these studies....)

And Seneca is as good as his word. In *Epistle 76*, he tells how, old as he is, he has commenced attending a course of philosophical lectures. «*Quid autem stultius est quam...non discere?*» («For what is more foolish than not to keep learning?»)²⁶ This prompts Seneca to repeat the proverb:

*...tamdiu discendum est, quemadmodum vivas,
quamdiu vivas.*

(*Ep. 76.3*)

(As long as you live, you must keep learning how to live.)

This very point was made famous by Solon in his old age:

Ἦράσκω δ' αἰεὶ πολλὰ διδασκόμενος²⁷

(I grow old always learning many things.)

And Cato at eighty-four in Cicero's *De Senectute* remarks that studies obliterate for one any awareness of growing old.²⁸ Nothing can assist us more in old age than wisdom. Not even travel can confer upon us the benefits reaped from knowledge. Traveling will give us new information and will acquaint us with geography and the customs of other people, but it will not make one a better or a sounder man: *neque meliorem faciet neque sanioorem*.²⁹ Such self-improvement is gained only by association with great thinkers of every age: *inter studia versandum est et inter auctores sapientiae*.³⁰

²⁶ *Ep. 76.1.*

²⁷ Solon, Fragment 18, 10, *Poetae Lyrici Graeci*, ed. Bergh.

²⁸ *De Senectute* 11.38: *Semper enim in his studiis laboribusque viventi non intellegitur quando obrepat senectus...*

²⁹ *Ep. 104.15.*

³⁰ *Ep. 104.16.*

Medicina aegro, non regio, quarenda est.

(*Ep.* 104.17)

(The sick man must search for medicine, not change of scene.)

Thus, wherever one goes, he should associate with physicians of the soul:

Ad meliores transi: cum Catonibus vive, cum Laelio, cum Tuberone. Quod si convivere etiam Graecis iuvat, cum Socrate, cum Zenone versare... Vive cum Chrysippo, cum Posidonio...

(*Ep.* 104.21-22)

(Turn to better men: live with the Catos, with Laelius, with Tubero. But if it pleases you to live with the Greeks also, associate with Socrates, with Zeno... Live with Chrysippus, with Posidonius...)

They will help to make you well. Turn to such men as patterns and exemplars.³¹

Si...exemplum desideratis, accipite Socraten, perpersicium senem, per omnia aspera iactatum, invictum tamen... Vis alterum exemplum? Accipe hunc M. Catonem recentiore, cum quo et infestius fortuna egit et pertinacius.

(*Ep.* 104.27,29)

(If you desire a model, take Socrates, an old man who has suffered much, one tossed among many hardships, but nevertheless unconquered.... Would you like another exemplum? Take M. Cato the Younger, to whom Fortune was more hostile and persistent.)

³¹ For Senecan passages on choosing an exemplary model or guide, consult *Ep.* 6.5-6; 11.8-10; 25.5-6; 52.2,7-9; 64.7-10; 94.40-41; 55; 102.30; 104.21-22; *De Brev. Vit.* 14.5-15.5; *De Otio* 1.1; and *De Vita Beata* 1.2.

In fact, Seneca singles out as exemplary a contemporary of his, one who endured the assaults of old age with fortitude and courage. Claranus was a former classmate whom Seneca had not seen in years. Now he is an old man, *sed mehercules viridem animo ac vigentem et cum corpusculo suo conluctantem*. His is a great spirit in a broken body.³²

Seneca also lauds those who, at whatever age, devote their time and energy to good deeds by helping others; such human beings not only render invaluable service to their fellow-men but also add joy and happiness to their own life.

*Cresco et exulto et discussa senectute recalesco,
quotiens ex iis, quae agis ac scribis, intellego,
quantum te ipse... superieceris.*

(*Ep.*34.1)

(I grow in spirit, I exult and, shaking off my old age, I glow again, whenever I realize, from what you do and write, how much you have surpassed even yourself.)

*Ego quidem percipio iam fructum, cum mihi fingo
uno nos animo futuros et quicquid aetati meae
vigoris abscessit, id ad me ex tua... rediturum.*

(*Ep.* 35.2)

(I am indeed already deriving enjoyment, when I imagine to myself that we are going to be of one mind and that whatever vigor has departed from me in my old age, associating with you will bring it back.)

Much of Seneca's life was devoted to his friends—to assisting, benefitting, and improving them. All of his writings served such a purpose, as did the *Epistulae Morales*, his *magnum opus*, written in his last years and addressed to his younger friend, Lucilius. He wished to share with him and other readers the philosophy, the precepts, the teachings that had guided him so well through the

³² *Ep.* 66.1-4.

dangerous waters of his own stormy career. It was indeed his literary activity that enabled him to divorce himself from the turbulence of the political world without withdrawing him from human relationships and confining him to a lonely solipsism which frequently befalls the elderly.

A man's life —be he old or young— is well-lived, if he serves others as well as himself.

Alteri vivas oportet, si vis tibi vivere.

(Ep. 48.2)

(You must live for another, if you wish to live for yourself.)

Those who conduct themselves in this way can reap each day the blessings of a meaningful life. Seneca would certainly have admired the words of the aged Ulysses to his sea-faring companions in Tennyson's poem:

—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done

.

... that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.³³

³³ «Ulysses» [1842], lines 49-52, 67-70, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1987), I, 619-620. Cf. Antigone's words to the aged Oedipus in Seneca's *Phoenissae*, lines 190-192: «...non est ... virtus, pater / timere vitam, sed malis ingentibus/obstare nec se vertere ac retro dare» (...it is not valor, father, to fear life, but to oppose vast evils, neither wavering nor yielding).