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**Form, Friendship, and the Self in Seneca's *Moral Epistles***

The capacity for and exercise of friendship was a celebrated Roman virtue (e.g., Cic. *Amic.* 20, 48), but *amicitia* was also a necessary and self-interested instrument for political and social advancement (Brunt 1988, Konstan 1997). In this paper, I examine the notions of friendship advanced by Seneca in three of his *Moral Epistles* to Lucilius (Letters 3, 9, and 19) to show how Seneca revises Roman friendship, separating it from social practices such as the *convivium* and *salutatio*, and likewise from the external evaluation of social performance. I then show that while the letters to Lucilius exemplify the new kind of friendship that Seneca describes, at the same time they reassert a traditional Roman priority that appears to conflict with Seneca's rejection of social obligations associated with conventional friendship, that is, the letters ensure the immortality (or at least the durability) of his name and reputation.

Seneca uses the epistolary form to represent the relationship between two friends who aspire to the philosophical good life. But Seneca's version of the good life includes significant departures from how that aim is elsewhere conceived. In *Ep.* 19, Seneca exhorts Lucilius to reject the pursuit of friends and influence, and to cease from seeking offices and other honors that were commonly accepted markers of success. Likewise, Seneca rejects choosing or cultivating friendships on utilitarian grounds (*Ep.* 9). In both *Ep.* 9 and 3, he recommends alternative criteria and methods for selecting a friend, and describes how to treat him: *toto illum pectore admitte; tam audaciter cum illo loquere quam tecum* (3.2).

The *Moral Epistles* play on conventional fictions about the epistolary form that were current in antiquity as now (e.g., Demetrius *On Style* 227), namely, that the letter offers a virtually unmediated representation of its author, and is an intimate, conversational form. If so, letters should be ideally suited to self-revelation. This capacity overlaps exactly with Seneca's description of what friends ought to do: *cum amico omnes curas, omnes cogitationes tuas misce* (3.3). It is unsurprising, then, that Seneca claims to wholly see and know Lucilius from his letters (e.g., *Ep.* 31.1). However, Seneca also declares that one should completely reveal himself *only* to a friend. If Seneca were committed to this position, presumably he would guard the readership of his own letters carefully. Nevertheless, at least one of the letters (*Ep.* 8.2) lays claim to a posthumous audience, and at *Ep.* 21.5, Seneca suggests that the letters will immortalize him and Lucilius. This promise of fame necessarily assumes a readership among posterity.

Because traditional Roman friendship was intrinsically social and socially regulated, and because the practices associated with *amicitia* traditionally provided the means for elite Romans to exercise and judge one another's ethical excellence (*virtus*), Seneca's revision of friendship within the *Moral Epistles* provides a key parallel to how Seneca revises Roman epistolarity by writing the *Moral Epistles*. Seneca's epistolary innovation is to make letters a medium through which the self is not primarily represented to others, but to oneself, and through which the self undergoes a continual process not only of examination but revision. In Seneca's collection, the letter is transformed from a social

instrument that represents and negotiates the social self, to an instrument that is used to reveal and craft an internally judged self. But this transformation co-exists with a longstanding priority of the Roman elite that Seneca does not overturn. Namely, even as Seneca engages in prolonged and serious self-reflection and advocates a radical renovation of traditional friendship, he still, good Roman that he is, commemorates himself.