Epilogue: The Stoic and the Saint

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"But None May Say What He Shall Find in Rome"[1]

The ninth winter of Nero's reign[2] was already grinding against the pumice-shored sea when Seneca stepped from his litter.[3] Low clouds were gathering in the west, the row of papyrus sellers scuttling about to protect their wares. The man of letters had to ply his trade this evening and did not want to send a slave in the rain – they would probably use the papyrus to keep their head dry.

Seneca was momentarily taken aback; his preferred shop, a stall at the end run by an Egyptian freedman named Cincinnatus, was now adorned with a large sign in vulgar Latin and worse Greek: "Buy Papyrus from a True Son of Ptolemy!" Glancing down the street, the philosopher scanned the other stalls' signs; if Ptolemy had half as many sons as were claimed on this corner alone, his virility would be the envy of Jove.

As he stepped toward the stall, Seneca was not greeted immediately; occupying the shopkeeper's attention was a wiry old man, whose bowed legs further diminished his already slight stature. Warm eyes peered from beneath beetled brows over a nose, perpetually hooked and formerly broken.[4] None of these, however, was his most distinctive feature, that being the somewhat chubby Roman soldier to which he was chained.

Seneca had seen this man before, of course; he was a frequent declaimer in the forum, and his distinctive feature, indeed, a memorable one. The fact that some senator had gotten his third son shackled to this ramshackle old man – to avoid both danger and leaving the luxuries of Rome – was an affront. Seneca had no doubt that if that schlub were standing closer, he would smell cologne instead of manliness.[5] Cato would not have stood for it!

1 E.A. Robinson, "Three Taverns," in *Collected Poems* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1921), 342. Incidentally, this is one of the only sustained literary portrayals of Paul that I know of.

2 I.e., 62 C.E.

3 Cf. Horace, *Carm.* I.11.5-6.

4 The description of Paul is an embroidered version of the one from *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 3. It does not seem an improbable fiction that Paul's various violent tribulations in Acts would have resulted in a broken nose.

5 Cf. *Ep.* 86.12.

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"Why, sir, so pleasant to see you again!" The shopkeeper's voice, calling from across the stall, startled the philosopher from his contemplation. "Ah, yes, Cincinnatus, I was just wanting to pick up a few sheets," Seneca replied. Yet, no sooner had the freedman turned to face Seneca than a hail of *hêus* followed from the chained street-orator. Vaguely discomfited, the philosopher watched as Cincinnatus cautiously waded toward him through the heaps of papyrus. Yet, he was pursued implacably by that beckoning old man, who, every couple of steps, would jerk the chain. Each time, the soldier would sigh and slide one step to the right.

This shuffling farce played out till the little man was shoulder-to-shoulder with Seneca. Eyebrows rising to vanish into his eponymous wig, Cincinnatus grimaced and shushed with his hands as he hissed, "Just a moment, friend," to the old man; he then attempted for the twelfth time to turn to Seneca. "It's a simple request. He can wait one moment longer than he already has," the old man added with mingled patience and insistence.

Eyes flicking to the horizon, Seneca sighed and waved to Cincinnatus, "Just attend to him first." The Egyptian gestured broadly, "He's not making sense!" The little old man threw up his hands. "I just want to write a letter!" With a gentle smile, the Senator noted, "How much papyrus do you need?" One finger raised, the man replied, "One *charta*." Cincinnatus thrust his hands out, "See!" Noting that the man's Latin was rather thickly accented, Seneca gently reproved, "We would say *chartula* for a sheet." The man shook his head and chopped the air emphatically with each stressed syllable. "No, I need the entire *charta* . . ." A wry smile dawned on his lips. "You see . . . my letters, well, they have been called weighty before."[6]

Now, it was Seneca's turn to throw up his hands. "A whole *charta*?" – one finger was raised in disbelief – "For one letter?"[7] He fixed his gaze on Cincinnatus who gestured to the old man before quipping: "I wish everyone would write so much . . . I'd be drinking Caecuban wine with lunch."[8]

A bit sheepishly, the old man added, "Well, a rather pernicious forgery is making the rounds in Asia, and . . ."[9] Sympathetically, Seneca nodded, "Ah yes, I too have been the victim of forgeries . . . another satire has been purveyed under the name of my own *Apocolocyntosis* . . . I mean, nobody even turns

6 Cf. 2 Pet 3:16.

7 For the outlandish size of Paul's letters even compared to Seneca's own verbosity, see E. Randolph Richards's essay in this volume.

8 Cf. Horace, *Carm.* II.xiv.25-8.

9 Cf. 2 Thess 2:2; 3:17.

into a vegetable," his voice sinking to a bewildered mutter.[10] It would only be later that the oddity of someone forging a letter by a street-orator would strike Seneca. The little man ran his hand through the gray wisps adorning his sun-splotched skull as he finished his thought. "I must also be thankful for a gift."

Hearing the reticence in his voice, Seneca inquired, "What was the matter with the gift? Did it come from a foul source? Count it as from fortune, even if it be from Claudius himself."[11]

The street-orator shook his head and drummed his fingers on his lips. "How to say . . . well, I worry how close *res fidei* is to *res fidesque*."[12] Seneca snorted derisively in agreement; Cicero's words on how most men weigh their friends like cattle – valuing those who presented the greatest potential for profit – hearkened to mind.[13] "Gifts aren't things to be absolved, the giver made whole – we don't say that![14] To think of gifts as investments is loansharking."[15]

Sighing, the little old man nodded, "I hope it won't be so . . . a gift should make us . . ." A hissed inhalation accompanied a finger twirled in the air as he grasped for the Latin of συγκοινωνός.[16] "A communit – Ack!" He stumbled backward, flailing, as the soldier with a sigh began walking and consequently dragging the old man toward where a young lad was selling apples about ten feet away. Dropping a few *assēs* into the cupped palm, the soldier took one; the old man glowered back at his silent captor.

Unconsciously following a couple steps, Seneca replied to the unwillingly fleeing street-orator, "Well said! Gifts are the great congealer of society."[17] The old man's wooly brows knit until they were nearly one. "Community is more than the exchange of *stuff*, just as the body is more than clothes, life more than food."[18] The soldier's loud crunching of the apple almost swallowed several of the old man's words.

Behind them, forgotten Cincinnatus, with such an exaggerated toss of his head as to threaten his wig, beckoned an older woman forward and began slicing off a sheet for her. For his part, Seneca paid no mind to Cincinnatus. Rather, waving his hands, Seneca blurted: "Do not misunderstand me, friend –

10 I am taking liberties with its murky textual history.

11 *Ben*. 1.15.5-6.

12 Paul is punning on the economic sub-definitions of *fides* and πίστις. Cf. Phil 4:10-19.

13 Cicero, *Amic*. 79.

14 *Ep*. 81.9. The linguistic distortions in the Latin are retained in the English.

15 *Ben*. 1.ii.3.

16 Phil 4:14.

17 *Ben*. 1.iv.2.

18 Matt 6:25.

if giving were about stuff instead of the will to give, receiving would be best, but that is simply not true."[19]

The old man's face visibly brightened at the comment, and the grating of the chain on the pavers accompanied his hurrying back toward Seneca, who elaborated over the racket, "As if a gift were a thing that you could grasp!"[20] While the street-orator raised a hand in reply, Cincinnatus interjected, "But you know what can be grasped? *Papyrus*! Here is the Nile's bounty; the forum . . . it is that way."

The two men stiffened at the interjection, their faces both coloring. Murmured apologies accompanied them both shuffling back to Cincinnatus' stand. Setting the entire *charta* on the counter, the Egyptian waited, eyes flicking to the leaden sky, as the old man painstakingly counted out four *denars* in *sesterces*.[21] Seneca fished out the half-a-handful of silver coins for his own bundle of papyrus and placed them in Cincinnatus' palm in the meantime.

As he heaved the *charta* into his thin arms, the orator mused to the philosopher. "It was good to speak with you." Seneca, gathering his own papyrus, nodded firmly. "Indeed. We should speak again." His eyes flicked downward to the armload of soon-to-be letter, a glimmer of a smile on his lips. "You obviously have much to say."

With that said, the two men walked off in opposite directions – Seneca, back to his litter, and the old man down the long road toward the forum. Cincinnatus muttered, "They didn't get each other's names, did they?" As he was being pulled away, the soldier took one last nibble at the barren core of his apple and just shook his head in reply.

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Paul glanced down to the letter in his hand then back up to the gilded manor swelling before him. It was an invitation to be at a *collegium-cum-symposium* hosted by a certain C. Pompeius Trimalchio,[22] a man that Seneca's letter-

19 *Ben.* I.vii.1.

20 *Ben.* I.v.2.

21 For the price of a *charta*, cf. E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 166.

22 T.S. Eliot writes that "[i]mmature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that which it is torn" ("Phillip Massinger," in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot* [ed. Ronald Schuchard and Anthony Cuda; vol. II; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014], 244).

carrier had confided[23] was a lofty monument to boorishness with the normal desire of such folk for the company of the learned. This Trimalchio hosted monthly *symposia* for groups of diverse thinkers to discourse; Seneca was a regular and had invited Paul as his guest for this month's. Paul knew this to be an opportunity for the way to access an entirely different sphere of Roman society. The corner of his mouth crinkled as he glanced to the letter's final, cheeky comment: well-wishing for the strength of his left hand.[24]

At the entrance, a uniformed doorman was shelling peas into a silver dish; above the lintel, a mottled magpie, suspended in a golden cage, greeted visitors.[25] The doorman obviously expecting a man of Paul's carceral condition, nodded a word of welcome but cringed at the sound of the chain being hauled over the steps.

As he walked in, a workman was laying a mural into the floor; Paul glanced over the artist's shoulder and found him laying the phrase *Cave Canem* beneath an image of a dog.[26] As Paul walked around the mural, a servant piously nodded her head toward a grand armoire housing a shrine for silvered household gods, a marble statue of Mercury, and a little, golden chest containing Paul cared not to imagine what.[27] The soldier bowed habitually, but the old man paid it no mind. A more insistent tossing gesture by the servant met no better result, but before she could vocalize this, the soldier shook his head to warn her that it was hopeless; she settled for a dirty look as Paul was ushered through the atrium toward the dining hall. The columns of which were affixed with calendars, one showing this Trimalchio's busy dining schedule, the other marked with the phases of the moon as well as lucky and unlucky days.[28] The soldier lingered to study these for a moment; Paul paid them no mind nor to the servant eyeing their feet as they crossed the threshold.[29]

As he stepped in, Paul hissed astonishment – the soldier gave a low whistle – at the cavernous size of the dining hall. ". . . Did the forum always have a roof?" The host had evidently misinterpreted the rules of dining and multiplied the muses by the graces[30] as no less than twenty-seven dining couches, nine to

23 Lincoln Blumell, "The Message and the Medium: Some Observations on Epistolary Communication in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 10 (2014): 24-67.

24 *Ep.* 45.13.

25 *Satyricon* §28.

26 A mingling of *Satyricon* §29 and Pompeii's House of the Tragic Poet.

27 *Satyricon* §29.

28 *Satyricon* §30.

29 Ibid.

30 Cf. Gellius, *Noct. att.* XIII.xi.2-3.

a side and one diner per couch,[31] dominated what Paul supposed was now nearer a *tredeciclinium*. A servant pointed to where a set of two chairs had replaced a couch next to Seneca's. The philosopher was instantly recognizable: self-austerity had chiseled deep lines into his features and hewn the patrician sleekness from a gristled old frame.

As Paul was walking, whispers simmered through the room – one groaning diner slammed his fist on the crest of his dining couch. "By the gods, Seneca! Not another Cynic!"

That out-burst aside, Paul and the rather put-upon soldier were seated with little interruption. Paul shifted in his chair to face the reclined philosopher a little better. "I must thank you for inviting me to this soiree . . . and our host for putting us close enough together to speak." He would likely have to shout to get the attention of the men across the dining hall. "Indeed, I fear poor Varro's heart would not survive . . ." A flourish of music fit for a triumph signaled the arrival of the appetizers; several plates of olives and damsons were set in the middle before the featured item, a roasted dormouse stuffed with a nut-and-pork pâté, was set before each diner.[32] The eyes of the soldier grew wide to see such a delicacy, and a ripple of awe washed through the dining room. His tone tart, Seneca muttered, "Why not whet our appetites by announcing their weight?"[33]

As he began sampling his own dormouse, Seneca shifted on his side raised his eyebrows to see Paul doing likewise. "I did not think that Jews ate such things." The old man blinked in surprise, "All things are, indeed, clean, but if I thought that my eating such" – he gestured to his dormouse – "would have an ill influence on any of you, I would abstain."[34] The philosopher nodded in approval before shifting his posture to accommodate a return to dining.

Conversation waned as the dormice were devoured; bones began to be tossed to the floor, and troops of slaves flocked to sweep them from the murals. Mouth still half-full, the hungry-eyed soldier inquired with a pointed finger if Paul was going to finish his dormouse and, at the lack of immediate, vehement affirmation, appropriated the dish. Seneca noticed and rolled on his side to-

31 A variation on the arrangement in *Satyricon* §34.

32 While the general outline has been drawn from *Satyricon* §31, the dormouse recipe from Apicius VIII.ix.1 has been substituted.

33 *Ep.* 95.42. E. Saglio notes the gauche practice of weighing fattened dormice at the table (E. Saglio and C. Daremberg, "Glirarium," in *Dictionnaire Des Antiquités Grecqueset Romaines* [trans. William P. Thayer; Paris: Librairie Hachette Et Cie., 1877-1919]).

34 Rom 14:20.

ward Paul, and raised a finger to chide, "It is the measure of a man's vigor that he neither runs after nor is seduced by such pleasures."[35]

Cringing to see the soldier licking pâté off his fingers, Paul nodded in agreement, ". . . There are indeed many whose god is their belly."[36] If the soldier even noticed, he gave no indication of caring. Seneca raised himself up on his left elbow and gave a flourish with his free hand, "What excellent phrasing, that!"

Another roar of music occurred signaling the fashionably-late arrival of the host Trimalchio carried in on a litter by six slaves. His elbow was propped up by a ridiculously small throw-pillow; laughter escaped from the unwary.[37] Misgivings evident on Paul's face, Seneca assured him, "A separate symposiarch is usually appointed – let us hope it is so on this evening."

Night had fallen by the time Paul stepped out of the door of Trimalchio's house. The revelry portion of the evening's bill had arrived to the dismay of them both, and a great ruckus of music and merry-making issued from within. It had taken some doing to drag the soldier from the possibility of flute-girls and Falernian wine. It was, of course, no less quiet outdoors where the nightly run of carts and cursing teamsters rumbled through the streets.

"Ah, Paul – I'm glad to see you too have no taste for such things," Seneca replied before glaring at Trimalchio's portal. "With him, it's always December!"[38] With a dismissive wave, he added, "We might as well inscribe his epitaph right over the door: 'Here lies C. Pompeius Trimalchio. He never listened to a philosopher.'"[39] Seneca was still shaking his head as Paul gave his chain another jerk to drag the soldier closer.

Yet, as he did so, a slave, torchless even in the gloom of a winter-evening, came running out of the darkness; Seneca obviously recognized the man and was startled to see him. "Plocamus! What's wrong?" Doubled-over with hands on bent knees, the man was so out of breath that, even despite his best efforts, he could not deliver his message for better on thirty seconds. Finally, he managed to gasp out, "Sir . . . I'm sorry . . . but . . . Burrus . . . Burrus . . . has died."

"Is – is it really so? I knew he was ill but . . . no, could it have been . . ." Eyes closing, lips tightening, Seneca shook his head once – no voicing suspicions of Nero in the night. Paul walked closer and softly said, "I'm sorry to hear that . . . was he a friend of yours?" The philosopher nodded slowly, his gaze fixed at some point in the blackness about them.

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35 *Ep.* 18.3.

36 Phil 3:19.

37 *Satyricon* §32.

38 *Ep.* 18.1.

39 A mingling of *Ep.* 60.4 and Trimalchio's self-authored epitaph in *Satyricon* §71.

"My apologies, Paul . . . I would like to linger and speak further; you had many interesting things to say, but this . . ." Seneca dragged his hand downward across his mouth and chin. "Yet . . . I . . . don't know if we will have a chance to speak again." The philosopher cast his gaze to the chain around Paul's ankle. Gesturing to his servant to follow, Seneca began to walk off in the other direction from Paul's destination.

"Farewell, Paul – it was, indeed, a pleasure." Paul shook his head once. "The pleasure was mine, Seneca." The corner of Paul's mouth clenched; disappointment welled within him so that his fist clenched unconsciously.

A bitter smile on his face, Seneca looked over his shoulder and, with a jaunty flourish of one hand, added, "It's time to part, I'm afraid. You go to die, and I to live, though which of us goes to the better lot, only God knows,"[40] as he vanished into the darkness.

40 *Apol.* §42a.