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# 4

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## The Dialogue in Seneca's *Dialogues* (and Other Moral Essays)\*

This chapter investigates the “dialogical” character of Seneca’s *Dialogues* and other moral essays. It consequently focuses upon Seneca’s philosophical works in prose other than the *Epistulae ad Lucilium*: namely, the ten works conventionally called the (Ambrosian) *Dialogi*, along with *De Clementia*, *De Beneficiis*, and *Naturales Quaestiones*. But as this description of the subject matter suggests (“Dialogues *and* other ...;” “works in prose *other than* ...”), these works pose generic and definitional conundrums. Labels commonly applied to some or all of these works include “dialogues,” “essays,” “moral essays,” and “treatises” – a range reflecting scholars’ perplexity in identifying candidate genres for these works and in assigning the works to these genres. I will argue that these works do form a coherent, definable genre and are therefore reasonably discussed together, and that Seneca himself, and subsequent writers who discuss his works, refer to this genre by the term *dialogi*, “dialogues.” My discussion is divided into three sections. First, I further pursue these questions of name and genre in order to characterize these works more precisely. Second, and most importantly, I probe their “dialogical” character by investigating the various voices that speak in them. Finally, by way of conclusion, I revisit my initial division of subject matter and reflect on the similarities and differences between these works and the *Epistulae*.

### Name and Genre

The works under discussion share an array of formal and stylistic features. All have explicit, named addressees. All display a general concern for the moral status of the named addressee and other implicit addressees, a concern couched explicitly or implicitly in terms of Stoic philosophy. All have

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a protreptic dimension, as Seneca seeks to persuade his addressees to adopt particular views or courses of action. And finally, all have a definite, unified theoretical or philosophical theme: these include consolation; virtues and vices (clemency, constancy, tranquility, anger); social practices, aspirations, and fears (benefits, leisure, the shortness of life, happiness); and the nature of the world (whether providence exists, the various natural phenomena investigated in the *Naturales Quaestiones*). These works broadly share the first three characteristics with the *Epistulae ad Lucilium*; the fourth, however – the unitary theme – is not a necessary feature of the letters (see the following).

The term “dialogue” (*dialogus*) was used in antiquity to label at least some of the works under discussion. A survey of this term's usages in the century preceding and following Seneca will help illuminate its implications. Throughout this period, *dialogus* can designate a literary genre with particular characteristics. It rarely designates real verbal exchange: more typically, it labels an invented exchange, presented in writing, between two or more interlocutors.<sup>1</sup> As a Greek loan word, it is fittingly used by some Roman writers to label the works of Plato.<sup>2</sup> Certain Ciceronian works are called *dialogi* by Cicero himself and later writers.<sup>3</sup> These works always involve several speakers and are theoretical in content, whether specifically philosophical (e.g., the *Academica*) or not (e.g., *De Oratore*). Furthermore, Cicero's *De Re Publica* and *De Legibus* are overtly indebted to Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* and thus reveal by their titles the generic and philosophical affiliation that Cicero intended for them.<sup>4</sup> Later writers, too, use the word *dialogi* to refer to invented conversations on theoretical or philosophical topics among two or more interlocutors.<sup>5</sup> That *dialogi* constitute a recognized Roman literary genre is clear from the fact that, in various authors, the term is listed alongside other terms designating genres, such as letters, history, oratory, satire, and poetry of various sorts.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Real exchange: Cic. *Att.* 5.5.2, 13.42.1. Invented, literary exchange: Cic. *Att.* 13.14/15.1, 13.19.3, *Fam.* 9.8.1; Quint. 5.14.27–8, 9.2.31; Suet. *Tib.* 42.2.

<sup>2</sup> Cic. *Or.* 151; Quint. 5.7.28; Fro. p. 230.17 VdH; Gel. 3.17.5; Apul. *Flor.* 20.9.

<sup>3</sup> *De Oratore*: Cic. *Fam.* 1.9.23, *Att.* 13.19.4, *Ascon.* 13C. *Academica*: Cic. *Fam.* 9.8.1, *Att.* 13.14/15.1, 13.19.3. *De Amicitia*: Gel. 17.5.1. *De Re Publica* and *De Finibus*: Cic. *Att.* 13.19.4.

<sup>4</sup> Schofield's analysis (2008, 63–70) assumes that Cicero's philosophical and rhetorical works are all properly designated “dialogues” (correctly, in my view) or “dialogue-treatises” (less correctly).

<sup>5</sup> Quint. 5.14.27; Tac. *Dial.*; Apul. *Flor.* 9.87, 18.130–40.

<sup>6</sup> Quint. 10.1.107, 129 (see the following), 10.5.15, 11.1.21; Suet. *Aug.* 89.3; Apul. *Flor.* 9.87, 20.12.

Now let us consider this word's association with certain works of Seneca. It is attached to ten Senecan prose works in the Codex Ambrosianus, an eleventh-century manuscript that is the most important surviving witness to these works, and in that manuscript's descendants.<sup>7</sup> These ten works are transmitted in twelve books, which are sometimes referred to as *Dialogi* books I through XII. The works themselves, however, also have individual titles and explicit addressees. The precise form of the titles varies among the manuscripts. As conventionally titled and in their manuscript order, these works are as follows: *De Providentia*, "On Providence;" *De Constantia Sapientis*, "On the Constancy of the Wise Man;" *De Ira*, "On Anger," in three books; *Ad Marciam de consolatione*, "To Marcia on Consolation;" *De Vita Beata*, "On the Happy Life;" *De Otio*, "On Leisure;" *De Tranquillitate Animi*, "On Tranquility of the Soul;" *De Brevitate Vitae*, "On the Shortness of Life;" *Ad Polybium de consolatione*, "To Polybius on Consolation;" and *Ad Helviam de consolatione*, "To Helvia on consolation." Whether these individual titles are attributable in some form to Seneca or were fabricated in the scribal tradition is uncertain.<sup>8</sup> When scholars speak of Seneca's *Dialogi*, then, they usually mean specifically this "Ambrosian" group of ten works.

Three other non-epistolary prose works by Seneca survive, transmitted in other manuscript traditions and nowhere directly associated with the term *dialogus*. These are *De Beneficiis*, "On Benefits," in seven books; *De Clementia*, "On Mercy," in two books; and *Naturales Quaestiones*, "Natural Questions," probably written in eight books but transmitted in a mutilated and disordered form in seven books. All, again, have explicit addressees.<sup>9</sup> These works represent the "other moral essays" mentioned in this chapter's title, to accompany the Ambrosian "dialogues" narrowly speaking. However, as noted earlier, these works exhibit many similarities in form, style, and content to the Ambrosian *dialogi*. Indeed, there is a compelling argument that *De Clementia*, which may have been planned for three books, was designed as a pendant to the three books of the earlier work *De Ira*. This suggests that Seneca, at least, regarded these two works (the latter expressly among the Ambrosian *dialogi*) as profoundly similar.<sup>10</sup> The term *dialogi* was also applied more broadly to Seneca's prose

<sup>7</sup> Manuscript tradition: Reynolds (1977, v–xx); Reynolds (1983, 366–9).

<sup>8</sup> Reynolds (1977, ix–x). Some manuscripts include the addressee's name in each title; others do not. The conventional titlature retains the addressee only for the three *consolationes*, to keep them distinct.

<sup>9</sup> Reynolds (1983, 363–5, 376–8) discusses the manuscript traditions. Again, the manuscripts vary regarding whether they give the addressee's name in the title.

<sup>10</sup> Mazzoli (2003, 133–8), citing earlier work by Bellincioni and Ramondetti; also Braund (2009, 70–3).

works, at least after his death. The grammarian Diomedes, writing in the fourth or fifth century CE, remarks that he found an unusual word usage “in Seneca, in the dialogue ‘On Superstition.’” While only fragments of Seneca’s *De Superstitione* survive, this citation shows that Diomedes knew the work under both a descriptive individual title and the overarching title or generic designation *dialogus*<sup>11</sup> – just as the Ambrosian works bear both individual titles and the overarching designation *dialogi*. Nor is this all. Quintilian, in his *Institutio Oratoria* (“Training for orators”), discusses Seneca’s style and overall value as a model for aspiring orators. Quintilian writes, “[Seneca] handled almost every literary subject: for speeches, poems, epistles, and dialogues of his are in circulation.”<sup>12</sup> The general congruence of this list with surviving or known works of Seneca – speeches are well attested, though now lost; poetry in the form of tragedies and epigrams survives; many (not all) *Epistulae ad Lucilium* survive, and other letters are attested – has long led scholars to suppose that, by *dialogi*, Quintilian meant prose works apart from the *Epistulae*, that is, the kinds of works that Diomedes and the Ambrosian manuscript also call *dialogi*. For otherwise this significant corpus of Senecan writing lacks a place in Quintilian’s scheme. Moreover, the fact that Quintilian mentions *dialogi* along with speeches and letters (two prose genres) and poems (a metagenre) suggests that he understood *dialogus* as designating a prose genre. And while Quintilian’s work postdates Seneca’s death by a quarter century, the two men were contemporaries: Quintilian states elsewhere that as a youth he had witnessed Seneca’s oratory and literary disputation.<sup>13</sup> It seems likely that Quintilian’s terms for the genres of Senecan literary production are Seneca’s own: for why would he use generic categories different from Seneca’s when he had personally encountered him and knew his works intimately?<sup>14</sup>

Two passages from Seneca himself, containing the only occurrences of the word *dialogus* in his corpus, may confirm this interpretation. In *Ep.* 100.7, Seneca describes Livy’s literary output: “He also wrote dialogues, which you could ascribe to history no less than to philosophy.” This statement exposes the assumption that a “dialogue” should be philosophical, even if Livy’s dialogues – oddly for the genre, yet fittingly for the author – were

<sup>11</sup> Diomedes, *GLK* 1.379.19 = F75 Vottero: *ut apud Senecam in dialogo de superstitione*. Fragments and testimonia: T64-F75 Vottero.

<sup>12</sup> Quint. 10.1.129: *tractavit etiam omnem fere studiorum materiam: nam et orationes eius et poemata et epistulae et dialogi feruntur*.

<sup>13</sup> Quint. 8.3.31, 12.10.11. Born in 35 CE in Calagurris, Quintilian spent his adolescence and young adulthood in Rome, returned to Calagurris ca. 60, and came back to Rome in 69. He must have encountered Seneca in the 50s during his oratorical apprenticeship.

<sup>14</sup> Vottero (1998, 9–10), stressing these authors’ contemporaneity.

in equal part “historical.” In the other passage, from *De Beneficiis* book 5 (18.1–19.7), Seneca stages a lively and contentious debate between the dominant, first-person voice (“Seneca”) and an unnamed interlocutor. At a certain point (19.8), Seneca interrupts this exchange, saying, *sed ut dialogorum altercatione seposita tamquam iuris consultus respondeam...* The word *altercatio* refers to the contentious exchange of rejoinders immediately preceding, which Seneca says he is putting aside (*altercatione seposita*).<sup>15</sup> In contrast, *ut ... tamquam iuris consultus respondeam*, “to give a ruling like a legal expert,” entails a monological reply to an inquiry, pronounced by the authority *ex cathedra*.<sup>16</sup> To my eyes, the word *dialogi* here carries its generic sense, and I would translate the ablative absolute thus: “breaking off the contentious exchange (that is characteristic) of *dialogi*, ...” For Seneca is announcing a change from alternating rejoinders to monologue and hence from the usual generic mode of *dialogus* (where one finds multiple speakers and rejoinders) to that of legal *responsum* (where one does not). This seems to imply that the work containing these words – *De Beneficiis* book 5 and presumably the rest of the work – falls into the generic category of *dialogus*.<sup>17</sup> Thus Seneca himself connects the term *dialogus* with philosophical content and interlocutors who argue, as instantiated in this work. And if *De Beneficiis* therefore counts as a “dialogue,” then so should all other Senecan works displaying such features – not only the Ambrosian *Dialogi* but also *De Clementia*, the *Naturales Quaestiones*, and various lost works.<sup>18</sup> The present chapter, then, could have been titled “Dialogues” *tout court*, as *dialogus* is a correct ancient generic designation, and probably Seneca’s own term, for all the prose works under consideration here. Dialogue was a productive literary form for Seneca, and he employed it throughout his writing career: the earliest, the *Consolatio ad Marciam*, is usually assigned to the late 30s CE, while the latest (probably), the *Naturales Quaestiones*, dates to 63–64, the last years of his life. When and why the particular dialogues found in the Ambrosianus were compiled and given their order, which has no evident chronological, thematic, or structural logic, is anyone’s guess.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Altercatio* in this sense: e.g., Livy 1.7.1–2; Cic. *Att.* 1.16.10, with the words of the exchange following.

<sup>16</sup> A legal *responsum* is indeed a reply to a question but need not recount the deliberations from which it emerged: e.g., *Ep.* 94.27 for *responsa* that do not provide their reasons. See Griffin (2013, 281).

<sup>17</sup> Mazzoli (1997, 344), *contra* Griffin (1976, 412n1) and others.

<sup>18</sup> So, e.g., Griffin (2013, 1n1), Vottero (1998, 9–10), Mazzoli (1997, 343), Mutschler (1995, 94–5), Abel (1991, 50–1, excluding *NQ*), Codoñer Merino (1983, 131–2). Cupaiuolo (1975, 60–1n2) surveys earlier scholarly opinion.

<sup>19</sup> Dates and chronology: Griffin (1976, 395–411), Abel (1967, 155–70). Regarding the structure of the Ambrosian collection, Schmidt (1961) discusses the problems and valiantly attempts an explanation.

### The "Dialogical" Character of Seneca's Dialogues

I now examine how Seneca constructs the dialogue in his dialogues. I focus on the authorial voice, the addressees, and other voices or interlocutors that intervene in these works. As noted earlier, all of Seneca's dialogues have explicit addressees. Their names always appear in these works' prefaces (apart from those whose openings are lost) and sometimes elsewhere; in some manuscripts they appear in the works' titles as well. In naming addressees, Seneca follows a regular but not invariable Ciceronian practice; Platonic dialogues never have addressees. Sometimes the relevance of a dialogue's contents to its addressee is reasonably clear. Each of the three consolatory works – to Marcia, Polybius, and Helvia – focuses on its addressee's specific situation, as each grieves the loss of a family member. *De Clementia*, addressed to Nero, offers advice to the young emperor in the period immediately following his accession. And the addressee of *De Brevitate Vitae*, Seneca's father-in-law Paulinus, is apparently being encouraged to retire from his magistracy (18–19) and devote his remaining years to philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Two addressees appear to be chosen at least partly for the aptness of their names. Annaeus Serenus is addressed in three dialogues on calm and equable states of mind: *De Constantia Sapientis*, *De Tranquillitate Animi*, and (probably) *De Otio*.<sup>21</sup> Seneca describes Serenus as having a "fiery and bubbly spirit," and Serenus is made to complain of emotional disturbances he suffers. These works thus play on the addressee's supposed lack of serenity, while Senecan therapy holds out the promise of harmonizing Serenus' disposition with his name.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, *De Beneficiis*, a dialogue on social exchange and generosity, is addressed to the fittingly named Aebutius Liberalis. Liberalis is presented as already being a generous reckoner of obligations (*Ben.* 5.1), hence less in need of Senecan therapy than Serenus is. Nevertheless, we may suppose that reading this work will help him become more perfectly *liberalis*, that is, more perfectly "himself."<sup>23</sup> Sometimes, however, a dialogue's relevance to its addressee is opaque. *De Ira* and *De Vita Beata* are addressed to Seneca's brother Novatus (later, after

<sup>20</sup> Williams (2003, 19–20), with further bibliography.

<sup>21</sup> For *Ot.*, the dedicatee's name is missing from the Ambrosianus, but Serenus is generally accepted: Williams (2003, 12–3).

<sup>22</sup> For Serenus' disposition, *Const.* 3.1 (*animum tuum incensum et effervescentem*); *Tranq.* 1.1–17.

<sup>23</sup> Such play between a text's theme and its addressee's name is also found in letters of Cicero (*Att.* 1.13.5) and Pliny (Whitton 2010, 132n84); Seneca's practice is thus not unique. Liberalis (*PIR*<sup>2</sup> A111: Griffin 2013, 96–8, Ker 2006, 37) and Serenus (*PIR*<sup>2</sup> A618: Griffin 1976, 354–5, Williams 2003, 12–13, Lefèvre 2003) are, however, real people.

adoption into another family, known as Gallio), yet these dialogues contain no information about this brother's situation or temper to explain why this address is suitable. The two surviving dialogues addressed to Lucilius, *De Providentia* and the *Naturales Quaestiones*, likewise offer no handle for explaining the appropriateness of the address.<sup>24</sup>

All these works feature a dominant, authoritative, first-person voice, which for convenience we can call "Seneca." Seneca addresses the named addressee (and others) in a lively, engaging "I-you" style, employing frequent rhetorical questions and exclamations. He advocates a particular (generally Stoic) view on the topic of the dialogue and therefore cajoles, exhorts, and chides the addressee and other possible interlocutors, including the reader, to embrace this view. Yet, for all that the Senecan voice predominates, these works positively pulsate with further voices – voices that either break in upon Seneca or that Seneca himself introduces, via direct or reported speech, as supporting or challenging his position. Most characteristic, perhaps, is the (unnamed) voice that scholars sometimes call the "fictive adversary" but that I will call the "generalized interlocutor." Seneca sometimes introduces this voice – cues it to come on stage – with a phrase like *inquis, inquit, dicet aliquis, scio quid dicas* ("you say," "he says," "someone will say," "I know what you're saying"). Often, however, it breaks in without introduction. Typically it interposes an objection or request for clarification, and Seneca normally responds with a second-person address, as if in conversation with this interlocutor. Especially when cued with a phrase like *scio quid dicas*, this voice may appear, within the fiction of the dialogue, to be "imagined" by Seneca – that is, the authorial voice foresees an objection or nuance and preemptively gives it voice so as to circumvent it. But this voice can also be imagined as a "real" objector, another *persona* notionally independent of Seneca the authorial voice (although, of course, equally invented and constructed for the dialogue by Seneca the author). Seneca also proactively offers explanations or poses questions to an unspecified *tu* or *vos*, giving the impression of one or more "real" interlocutors (voices that are, within the fiction of the dialogue, independent of Seneca). Now, in its propensity to lodge "commonsense" objections or seek clarification, the generalized interlocutor is depicted as an "everyman" who is less well versed in Stoicism than Seneca, is not altogether comfortable with the paradoxology of Stoic argumentation, and hence makes a suitable (if sometimes resistant) object of Seneca's tutelage and guidance. As readers, we are sometimes tempted to

<sup>24</sup> Williams (2014), however, suggests that *NQ*, the *Epistulae*, and the (lost) *Libri moralis philosophiae*, all dedicated to Lucilius, are "related movements" in Seneca's communication with him.



identify this interlocutor with the dialogue's named addressee – especially when the interlocutor's rejoinders are introduced with the second-person singular form *inquis* and when *inquis* occurs in a passage in which the addressee also receives an explicit, second-person address. But the typicality of the situations and problems explored in these dialogues equally invites us to maintain a more general view of the interlocutor's identity – and the more so when Seneca uses the second-person plural or the third-person form *inquit*. Thus Seneca's slippery rhetoric of address conspires with the universality of the named addressees' situations (grieving, contemplating retirement, seeking serenity of mind) to make one person's problems or questions into everyone's. This "everyone" may include us readers, for we ourselves may find the dialogue's situation resonant.<sup>25</sup> Seneca's Stoic therapy then applies ecumenically to "you" in particular (the named addressee) and to "you" in general (the generalized interlocutor, the reader).<sup>26</sup>

Yet these voices – authorial voice, named addressee, generalized interlocutor – are by no means the whole story: a profusion of further, heterogeneous voices populates these works as well. Seneca frequently invokes the opinions of other philosophers, via direct or reported speech, and he regularly quotes edifying passages from poets, especially Vergil and Ovid. Exemplary figures drawn from the past or present, from Republican heroes and emperors to gladiators and slaves, may be given voice to externalize their moral states. The Stoic sage sometimes speaks or has his subjectivity described. The very topics of the dialogues can speak out, personified: in *De Providentia*, God (*providentia*) speaks at length (6.3–9), as do his alter ego *natura* (3.14) and his evil twin *fortuna* (3.3); and in *De Ira*, anger speaks (1.18.6). Furthermore, all such voices participate in an exchange of rejoinders. When citing philosophers or poets, Seneca regularly expresses approval or disapproval of their sentiments or propositions. He thereby either aligns these authorities with his own position or preemptively undercuts them as authorities to whom opponents might appeal. Simple approval for some saying of a famous philosopher is common (e.g., *Prov.* 1.3). More complex is Seneca's mocking of Chrysippus, early in *De Beneficiis* (1.3.8–4.6), for making impertinent statements about *charis* (gratitude). Not only does he undercut Chrysippus' authority in case opponents should invoke it, but he actively recruits the

<sup>25</sup> Efforts to distinguish *inquis* from *inquit* as indicating different speakers, or to distinguish voices that object from those seeking clarification, seem to me hypercritical (Codoñer Merino 1983, 135–9, citing earlier scholarship).

<sup>26</sup> That these interlocutors are not necessarily adversarial or fictive explains why I prefer "generalized interlocutor" to "fictive adversary." On this interlocutor's characteristics see, e.g., Gaully (2004, 78–85), Williams (2003, 27), Mazzoli (2000), Codoñer Merino (1983), and Pusch (1942, 28–45).

generalized interlocutor to his own side, requesting his support against anyone who might consider Seneca's criticism of Chrysippus out of order. Regarding poetry, an anonymous couplet quoted at *Ben.* 1.2 receives detailed exegesis, with the first verse criticized and the second approved. And in *De Providentia* 5.10–11, an extensive quotation of Sol's words from Ovid (*Met.* 2.63–81) is twice interrupted by (prose) responses from Phaethon, composed by Seneca – no such words are present in Ovid – to create a mini-dialogue on the subject of fortitude that supports Seneca's current exhortation.<sup>27</sup> Augustus' speech in *De Clementia* (1.9.4–11), interrupted by advice from Livia, replicates in microcosm the advice Seneca is offering Nero; likewise, in the *Consolatio ad Marciam*, the long consolatory speech addressed by the philosopher Areus to Livia (4–5) mirrors Seneca's overall advice to Marcia. God himself cannot escape the exchange of rejoinders: his long speech in *De Providentia* 6.3–9 is interrupted by an objection from the irrepressible interlocutor (6.6), against which God must defend himself. A particularly striking type of "further voice" is a speaker's own self, hypostasized to address him from a position of superior knowledge. Serenus, in his opening statement in *De Tranquillitate Animi*, describes his struggle to maintain an even moral keel and quotes the self-exhortations and Stoic precepts by which he seeks to corral his unruly states of mind. Thus a "better," more serene Serenus, presented as a separate and more philosophically advanced voice, chides the everyday, struggling Serenus for his moral inadequacy.<sup>28</sup> Such examples can be multiplied *ad libitum*. Seneca's dialogues, in short, teem with voices, all of which are "dialogized" – brought into the give and take of assertion, criticism, and defense and thereby implicated in the protreptic of each work. Giancarlo Mazzoli, a rare scholar who has attended seriously to these further voices, speaks of the "polyphonic play" of the *De Providentia*; this characterization is valid for all of Seneca's surviving dialogues.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, these voices and their characteristic interplay are often visible in fragments of lost works. This is consistent with the hypothesis that many lost works are also *dialogi*.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See Mazzoli (2000, 256–7) and Lanzarone (2008, 371–2), who shows how Seneca's additions change the moral valence of Ovid's text.

<sup>28</sup> *Tranq.* 1.11, 13; the phenomenon is widespread in Seneca. Bartsch (2006, 191–208, 230–43) and Long (2009, 26–36) discuss such dialogue between a philosophically superior, "normative" judging self and an imperfect, "occurrent" acting self; also Bartsch, this volume.

<sup>29</sup> Mazzoli (2000, esp. 256, "gioco polifonico"). This is not "polyphony" in the Bakhtinian sense of "equal rights" among voices: in Senecan dialogue, no other voice has "rights" equal to the dominant authorial voice. My phrase "further voices" is a nod to Lyne (1987), which first exposed me to some of these concepts.

<sup>30</sup> Vottero (1998, 9–10) considers eleven lost works to be *dialogi* (T19–F96).

This survey of the voices in Seneca's dialogues and the ways they respond to and anticipate one another allows us to revisit the definitional questions with which we opened. Scholars have long been perplexed by the differences in form, style, and content between Seneca's dialogues and their putative Ciceronian and Platonic models. Unlike these models, Seneca's dialogues are not typically framed by indications of time, place, and occasion; his speakers are not consistently identified, characterized, or given ongoing roles in the conversation; and very rarely does any Senecan speaker apart from the authorial voice expound theory or doctrine at length.<sup>31</sup> How, then, can Seneca's works reasonably be called "dialogues"? An old solution to this perceived problem was to classify Seneca's works as "diatribes," by which was meant a (sub)genre, or set of characteristic rhetorical moves, associated with "popular philosophy": a lively I-you style peppered with exclamations, rhetorical questions, and interjections by unnamed adversaries and a relatively unsystematic exposition of doctrine. This solution no longer commands acceptance, however, as no such genre or package of rhetorical moves is now thought to have been recognized in antiquity, under the name "diatribe" or any other.<sup>32</sup> An alternative solution, more recently favored, is to regard the word *dialogus* as a rhetorical term indicating a figure of thought: for Quintilian remarks (9.2.31) that the Greek word *διάλογος* can refer to what the Latins call *sermocinatio*, a subset of *prosopopoeia*. All these terms refer to the characterization of speakers in invented speech. On Quintilian's authority, then, scholars have suggested that Seneca's "dialogues" are so named not to indicate generic belonging but in honor of a rhetorical figure (*διάλογος/sermocinatio*) featured in them.<sup>33</sup> To me, however, this explanation seems unsatisfactory: as we have seen, *dialogus* (as a Latin word) can indicate a genre with the characteristics we find in Seneca's dialogues; and furthermore, Seneca's dialogues, thanks to the authorial voice's control over the presentation, contain significantly *less* in the way of invented speeches with multiple and extensive rejoinders, hence less opportunity for characterizing speakers via speech, than do the dialogues of Plato or Cicero. Seneca's dialogues thus offer less scope, not more, to take their name from this rhetorical figure.

<sup>31</sup> Pusch (1942, 8–10), Codoñer Merino (1983, 132), Mazzoli (2000, 249–50).

<sup>32</sup> Oltramare (1926, 252–95) expounds the "diatribe" thesis for Seneca; also Pusch (1942, 57–66). Modern critiques: Griffin (1976, 13–16, 411–15); Codoñer Merino (1983, 133–5); Powell (1988, 12–15); Williams (2003, 26). The implied charge of sloppiness in exposition has been met by detailed structural analyses: Abel (1991), Wright (1974), Grimal (1986 [1949]).

<sup>33</sup> Griffin (1976, 414), Williams (2003, 3–4), Ker (2006, 26), Lanzarone (2008, 13); but Pusch (1942, 16–20) already offers solid objections.

In my view, no solution is needed because there is no problem. First, crucial similarities between Senecan and Ciceronian dialogue have been overlooked. While many of Cicero's dialogues do feature careful scene setting and a set group of named interlocutors who take orderly turns exchanging rejoinders,<sup>34</sup> some do not. Two works in particular – *De Officiis* and *Orator* – closely resemble Senecan dialogues in key respects: they have named addressees; neither involves scene setting; and both feature a dominant, authorial voice that controls the exposition and introduces other voices as needed. Also like Seneca, Cicero in these dialogues regularly names, quotes, or paraphrases philosophers, poets, or exemplary figures from the past, with approval or disapproval; he sometimes employs rhetorical questions and exclamations;<sup>35</sup> and he sometimes introduces a generalized interlocutor, who may or may not be identifiable with the addressee, to pose objections or express a divergent opinion.<sup>36</sup> Thus no characteristic device of Senecan dialogue is without its Ciceronian precedent; the difference between these authors' practices is in degree, not in kind. Indeed, these differences might appear even less stark if dialogues by other authors, now lost, had survived – dialogues employing the “dominating authorial voice” model rather than the model of dramatic or narrated exchanges among several well-defined, turn-taking voices.<sup>37</sup>

These observations lead to a second, more fundamental point about the characteristics of “dialogue.” In a contemporary critical environment that has absorbed the ideas of Bakhtin, Kristeva, and a bevy of narratologists, differences in the ways that literary works present speech and achieve focalization are now more readily perceived as variations of a single underlying phenomenon than as fundamentally different phenomena. For Bakhtin, at least in his later work, “dialogism” is a characteristic of language as such: every utterance is constructed in response to previous utterances and in anticipation of utterances that will respond to it in turn. Thus the words of others, real or imagined, saturate all speech. Indeed, “dialogue” narrowly speaking – a more or less formalized exchange of rejoinders among several speakers – is merely an interesting special case of the “dialogism” that

<sup>34</sup> *De Or., Tusc., Fin., Acad., Div.*

<sup>35</sup> *Off.* 1.112–4, 2.25; *Or.* 109–10.

<sup>36</sup> *Off.* 1.29, 74; 2.7; 3.76, 79, 100–110; *Or.* 36, 143–5.

<sup>37</sup> *Cic. Att.* 13.19.4 describes an “Aristotelian custom” of dialogue writing, in which a dominant voice introduces the speech of other voices. This well describes *Off.* and *Or.*, and Seneca's practice. The total loss of Aristotle's dialogues, however, renders all such discussion speculative (Schofield 2008, 68–70, 75–6 discusses Cicero's Aristotelian dialogical praxis). Subsequent to Seneca, Tacitus' *Dialogus* involves careful scene setting and named speakers exchanging rejoinders, while Plutarch's *Moralia* exhibit both the orderly turn-taking model and the dominant authorial voice model.

characterizes all language.<sup>38</sup> On such an understanding, it seems hairsplitting to draw sharp distinctions between Seneca's form of "dialogue" and notional generic norms identified in Cicero and Plato. On the contrary, it seems natural and obvious to allow all works in which multiple voices discuss theoretical or philosophical problems to coexist under the same generic umbrella, regardless of variations in how exactly these voices are staged.

### Why Seneca's Dialogues Are Not Epistles ... or Are They?

By way of conclusion, it seems worthwhile to explore one last scholarly conundrum: the relationship of Seneca's dialogues to his *Epistulae ad Lucilium*. There are striking similarities. As noted earlier, the dialogues and epistles both have explicit addressees, display a generally moral and Stoic philosophical orientation, and employ hortatory rhetoric. Now we may add that the *Epistulae* generally feature the same array of "further voices" as the dialogues do: other philosophers, poets, exemplary figures, and the addressee/generalized interlocutor, all choreographed by the dominant authorial voice of Seneca. Though on average much shorter than the dialogues, a few *Epistulae* are long enough to rival the shortest dialogues; and the dialogues themselves vary greatly in length.<sup>39</sup> Thus one may perceive a complementarity, where the epistolary form is perhaps deemed suitable for short to mid-length expositions and the dialogue form serves for mid-length to long expositions.

Yet there are also crucial differences between the Senecan epistle and dialogue, as recent work by Wilson, Lana, and Inwood has shown. First, there are formal distinctions: the *salutem* and *vale* formulae are inevitable at a letter's opening and closing but absent from the dialogues. Second, diverse topics may be treated within a single letter, whereas the dialogues are monothematic.<sup>40</sup> Third, the organizational scale of thematic discussions in the

<sup>38</sup> Particularly helpful for thinking about the ancient genre of dialogue is Bakhtin's late (1952–3) essay "The problem of Speech Genres": Bakhtin (1986, 60–102). My own language and thinking is indebted to the Bakhtinian formulation of "dialogism." Other scholars who discuss Seneca's dialogism in Bakhtinian terms are Gauly (2004, 74–7), Bartsch (2006, 240n13); similarly Meyer (2006), without invoking Bakhtin explicitly.

<sup>39</sup> The *Epistulae* range from 149 words (*Ep.* 62) to 4164 and 4106 words (*Ep.* 94 and 95). These longest letters just surpass the 4081 words of *Prov.*, the shortest complete Ambrosian dialogue. The longest Ambrosian dialogue, *De Ira* 3, is 9306 words, more than twice as long. Maurizio Lana (in Lana 1991, 290–305) provides word counts for the Ambrosian dialogues and *Epistulae*, but not for *Clem.*, *Ben.*, or *NQ.*

<sup>40</sup> Thus the (spurious) title/subject headings attached to each letter in the Loeb edition – as if each were a monothematic dialogue in miniature – are misleading and misrepresent the letters' character.

collection of *Epistulae* is both shorter and longer than in the dialogues. Within an individual letter, shorter length combined (sometimes) with diverse subject matter provides less scope for developing a given theme than the longer, monothematic dialogue form provides. But a given theme may be treated from diverse perspectives in many different letters, yielding a more sprawling, leisurely, contextualized exposition over the entire epistolary collection than could be achieved in a single, focused dialogue. Fourth, the collection of *Epistulae* displays an overall development – a “surreptitious narrative,” in Wilson’s words – that rewards reading the letters sequentially and penalizes reading them separately; the dialogues, conversely, seem to be autonomous works not intended to be read in any particular order.<sup>41</sup> Seneca surely had reasons to choose one genre or the other for a given purpose, and these scholars’ helpful and subtle analyses give an inkling of what is at stake in this choice. But these scholars are also reproducing an ancient *topos*, which we see manifested in Demetrius’ treatise *On Style* from the Hellenistic or early Imperial period. This work discusses at length (223–35) the similarities and differences in style, form, and content between letters and dialogues. Thus the debate about how and whether to pry these genres apart is itself two millennia old, a fact that constitutes the clearest possible proof of their close kinship and mutual entanglement – their tendency to gravitate together and, under certain conditions, meld. Indeed, James Ker has argued that Seneca’s works in general resist being read in “monogeneric” ways; he examines generic blurring not only between dialogues and epistles but also elsewhere in the Senecan corpus.<sup>42</sup> Having opened this chapter by excluding the *Epistulae* from discussion, then, I close by bringing them back into the generic conversation as a kindred literary form that, in the end, can be distinguished from the *dialogi* only with care.<sup>43</sup>

### Further Reading

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed much scholarly interest in whether “dialogue” is an ancient genre, what characteristics works called “dialogues” have, which of Seneca’s prose works count as “dialogues,” and how such works relate to their notional Ciceronian and Platonic models. Pusch’s (1942) dissertation lucidly summarizes the

<sup>41</sup> Wilson (1987, 2001, 186 for quote); Lana (1991, 271–4); Inwood 2007a. Within multibook dialogues, however, individual books are clearly ordered; also, as noted earlier, *De Ira* and *De Clementia* may be paired.

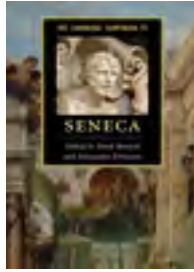
<sup>42</sup> Ker (2006, esp. 31).

<sup>43</sup> In this spirit, I refer the reader to Catharine Edwards’ chapter on the *Epistulae* in this volume.

evidence and arguments that characterized that discussion and provides all the earlier bibliography. More recently, with scholarly fashion favoring Seneca's *Epistulae* over his other prose works, the genre question has been discussed most fruitfully by scholars seeking to identify what is distinctive about the letters: for example, Wilson (1987 and 2001), Lana (1991), and Inwood (2007a); however, Ker (2006) offers a broader view. Furthermore, the rise of narratology and of Bakhtinian approaches to literature in the later decades of the twentieth century have decisively reframed discussions about "dialogue:" Bakhtin (1986 [1952]) is an accessible introduction to this critic's (late) thought about the "dialogicity" and polyvocal quality of certain kinds of literature. Scholarship on the diverse voices in Seneca's prose works – how they are presented, what authority they have, what their ideological effects are – is sparse, but Codoñer Merino (1983, e.g.) and especially Mazzoli (1997 and 2000, e.g.) have thoughtfully explored dimensions of this question.

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