# Intratextuality and Intertextuality in Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones*

**Titles and abstracts**

1. **Daniel Markovich** (University of Cincinnati, markovdl@ucmail.uc.edu)

**"The form of thesis and Seneca's *Naturales quaestiones*."**

The term *quaestio* in the title of Seneca's philosophical treatise is typically linked to the Greek terms *problemata* and *zetemata*, which are traditionally associated with Aristotle. In this talk, I aim to go beyond these Aristotelian equivalents and connect Seneca's *quaestio* with the Hellenistic concept of thesis. Although thesis is often linked to rhetorical training (as part of the traditional *progymnasmata*), evidence shows that during the Hellenistic period, it was used primarily by philosophers to cover exactly the types of questions Seneca addresses in *Naturales Quaestiones*.

2. **Barney Taylor** (Oxford, barnaby.taylor@classics.ox.ac.uk )

**"Senecan humour and humility"**

I will develop a reading of self-effacing wit in *NQ* and the *Epistulae Morales*, ranging across ethics and natural philosophy within Seneca's oeuvre. I will consider the functions of self-doubt, embarrassment, and jokes at one's own expense in Seneca's philosophical art, and consider them alongside some contrastive gestures in those same texts.

3. **Elena Giusti** (St John's College, Cambridge, eg382@cam.ac.uk)

**"Seneca's Aethiopia and the Empire's Last Threshold."**

In Book 6 of the *Naturales Quaestiones*, Seneca inserts an anecdote about two centurions who were sent by Nero to Aethiopia on an exploratory mission to find out the origin of the Nile (*QNat.* 6.8.3-4). The anecdote, whose historicity might be confirmed by a parallel (albeit very different) passage of Pliny the Elder (*HN* 6.81), contains plenty of double-edged commentary on both Nero's and the empire's thrust for epistemic power, not least via inter-textual connections with a parallel wish expressed by Julius Caesar in Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile* (Luc. 10.188-9). At the same time, intra-textuality within the *Naturales Quaestiones*, and specifically with the passage describing the 'veins of the Nile' around Philae (*QNat.* 4a.2.7), reveals instead the irony suffused in Seneca's reporting of the centurions' eavesdropped conversations, suggesting that neither the centurions nor Nero are in tune with Seneca's crucial message that not all natural phenomena can be discerned by the human eye. In this paper, I explore this passage's relationship with other Aethiopian and Egyptian landscapes (described, as Servius tells us in his commentary to *Aeneid* 6, in Seneca's lost treatise *De situ et sacris Aegyptiorum*) to suggest that Nero's Aethiopia emerges here as an imaginary space where the distinction between upperworld and netherworld is blurred; a space to test the limits of the human domain over nature, of the terrestrial world, and of the Roman empire's thirst for both military and epistemic dominion.

4. **Margaret Graver** (Dartmouth College, margaret.r.graver@dartmouth.edu)

**"Once again, why physics? Figures of the βίος θεωρητικός in the *Quaestiones Naturales* and *Epistulae Morales*".**

In an earlier study I argued that the *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* develop to great extent the justification for the life of study that was offered in *De Otio*. The *Quaestiones Naturales* participate in this same dynamic, but by a different argument. Where the *Ep. Mor.* defends the *bios theoretikos* primarily on grounds of the therapeutic benefits ethical writings confer on subsequent generations of readers, the *NQ* offers primarily the justification on

the basis of nature, that studying the universe is the natural activity of the uncorrupted human being. In the paper, I will strengthen our understanding of the relationship between the two works by highlighting several specific intertextual connections, of which the most pronounced concerns the imagery of bedazzlement in *Ep*. 58.25, *Ep*. 65.17-18, *NQ* 3 pref. 11, and *NQ* 1 *pref*. 1-2.

5. **Chiara Graf** (University of Maryland, cgraf@umd.edu)

**"Seneca's Liquid Quotations: Reflections on Self and Other in the *Natural Questions*."**

In *Epistle* 84, Seneca famously compares the ideal reader to a bee, who flits about collecting pollen from a variety of textual flowers. Digestion is paramount in this metaphor: in order to create sweet honey, we reader-bees must blend our sources together, incorporating them seamlessly into our minds until their origins are unrecognizable (*Ep.* 84.5-8). This idyllic image of literary assimilation as honey-production jives with Stoic hermeneutics, which conceptualize literature, in all its variety, as reflective of a single, underlying cosmic *logos* (Batinski 1993). Yet we can contrast this ideal of sweet blended honey with a different vision of literary assimilation. As Trinacty (2018) points out, at the end of book 3 of the *Natural Questions,* identifiable poetic citations and intertexts fall away, and Seneca's sources churn together indistinguishably, much like the waters that comprise the Stoic cataclysm described in this passage. The latter passage portrays textual blending as part of a horrifying process of disintegration; though it "digests" its sources in the way prescribed by Seneca's bee metaphor, its affective valence is diametrically opposed to the pastoral charm of *Epistle* 84, just as the obliterating indistinction of Stoic cataclysm is the horrifying counterpart to otherwise reassuring accounts of the unity of the cosmos (Porter 2020). I take these ambivalent visions of textual blending as an invitation to re-examine the *Natural Questions*' most "undigested" (*solida, Ep*. 84.6) literary references: his direct quotations of poetry. Given that horrifying cataclysm constitutes the dark double of sweet source-blending honey, what might Seneca stand to gain from quoting poetic passages in full, rather than weaving their wisdom less conspicuously into the content of his text? Building upon works such as Berno (2012), Trinacty (2018), and Garani (2020), I will focus on Seneca's citations of verses describing water or other liquids. I will suggest that these citations harness the particular quality of water as both transparent and reflective (see Purves 2024) in order to mediate the relationship between authorial self and other. I argue that these quotations—themselves noticeable traces of a textual other within the unifying cosmic structure of the *NQ*—draw out forms of authorial otherness that may coexist with sameness. They thus make room (even within a hermeneutic model that understands all literature as the product of a single underlying *logos*) for the preservation of distinct authorial identities, identities which would be destroyed by the literary cataclysm of seamless textual assimilation.

**Works Cited**

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6. **Catharine Edwards** (Birbeck College, London, c.edwards@bbk.ac.uk)

"**Beyond the Scipionic circle: Seneca, Scipio and Cicero in the *NQ*.**"

Seneca, in the NQ, proclaims his lack of interest in history (as Jonathan Master has recently noted) – and indeed makes clear his lack of interest in Rome itself. Rome, as Harry Hine observes, is barely mentioned. The only occurrence of the word *patria* in *NQ* comes in the preface to Book 3 in the vignette of Hannibal, Rome's paradigmatic foe. Yet, inevitably, a reference to Hannibal sets off associations with the Punic wars and with the great Roman general Scipio Africanus, who defeated Hannibal, as well as his grandson who destroyed Carthage. I want to explore the implications of the presence, albeit fleeting, of the Scipios and figures associated with them at various points in the *NQ*. In particular I would like to connect this with the traces that may be detected in the *NQ* of a number of works of Cicero, especially the De re publica. These Ciceronian traces, I'd like to suggest, work to highlight all the more sharply Seneca's ultimately very different agenda.

7. **Myrto Garani** (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, mgarani@phil.uoa.gr)

**"Earth-shaking truths: Who are the philosophers who fall for the earthquake-free Delos?"**

This paper examines Seneca's critique of the belief that the island of Delos was immune to earthquakes, as discussed in *Naturales Quaestiones* 6.26. Through a close analysis of Seneca's explicit references to poets and historians—including Vergil, Pindar, Thucydides, and Callisthenes—this study demonstrates how Seneca employs intertextual references that are inherently interconnected to challenge both mythological and historiographical narratives. He rejects Pindar's portrayal of Delos as a symbol of cosmic stability and criticizes Thucydides' and Callisthenes' accounts of an extraordinary earthquake as a prophetic omen. While Seneca dismisses these misconceptions, rooted in poetic imagination and unreliable historical sources, he adopts Pindar's and Vergil's sublime vision and oracular perspective, redirecting them to articulate his Stoic doctrine. Furthermore, his critique implicitly enacts a philosophical demolition of Theophrastus' argument for the eternity of the world, asserting instead that all things are inevitably subject to decay and destruction. Ultimately, this paper underscores Seneca's broader philosophical stance that natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, should be understood through rational inquiry rather than as manifestations of divine intervention.

8. **Christopher Trinacty** (Oberlin College, ctrinact@oberlin.edu)

**"Imagination and Explanation: Sen. *NQ* 7.10 and Ovid *Met.* 2.70-78."**

My paper investigates a moment of Ovidian quotation in Book 7 of Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones* and the way this quotation reverberates in the work as a whole. In section 10.1, Seneca writes:

> Praeterea manere in alto non potest ignis turbine inlatus, nisi ipse quoque permanet turbo. quid porro tam incredibile est quam in turbine longior mora, utique ubi motus motu contrario uincitur? habet enim suam locus ille uertiginem, quae rapit caelum, 'sideraque alta trahit celerique uolumine torquet.' et ut des eis aliquam aduocationem, quod fieri nullo modo potest, quid de his cometis dicetur qui senis mensibus apparuerunt?

The quotation comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the story of Phaethon. While the figure of Phaethon is important for the *Naturales Quaestiones* (and in Senecan philosophy), I am interested in the way that the larger context of this passage also resonates in Seneca's work. It is my contention that Seneca draws upon Ovid's account here to connect various metapoetic and philosophical strands present in his work that concern imagination and

visualization. In Ovid's epic, the lines make up part of the description that Sol is giving to Phaethon about what he will see, should he take up the reins of the chariot (2.70-78).

adde, quod adsidua rapitur vertigine caelum
sideraque alta trahit celerique volumine torquet.
nitor in adversum, nec me, qui cetera, vincit
inpetus, et rapido contrarius evehor orbi.
finge datos currus: quid ages? poterisne rotatis
obvius ire polis, ne te citus auferat axis?
forsitan et lucos illic urbesque deorum
concipias animo delubraque ditia donis
esse: per insidias iter est formasque ferarum!

The quotation appears in an apposite context: the whirlwind is unable to maintain its form in the celestial realm because its frantic motion is anathema to the ordered revolution of the firmament. Thus, the chariot of the sun fights (*nitor in adversum*) against such a rotation as it travels across the sky. But, Sol is also creating an image of the celestial sphere for Phaethon to understand and the phrase *concipias animo* (cf. 3.pr.9) also resonates in Seneca's own work. My paper investigates how this Ovidian moment, with its appeal to the imagination as well as the larger thematic and philosophical importance of Phaethon (cf. 3.27.13), helps the reader to understand Seneca's literary and philosophical goals in the *Naturales Quaestiones*.

9. **Fabio Tutrone** (University of Palermo, fabio.tutrone@unipa.it)

**"Nero, Lucretius, and Seneca's Rainbow: On the Neronian Intertextuality of *QNat.* 1.5.6."**

The *Natural Questions* can be dated to the early 60s, a difficult time for Seneca and Nero, as the former withdrew from the latter's court in the vain hope of escaping the emperor's wrath – with the clear feeling of having used up his life in fruitless pursuits (*annos inter vana studia consumptos*, *QNat*. 3.*praef*.2). In the present paper, I shall argue that the only quotation of Nero's poetry in the Senecan corpus – which comes from Book 1 of the *Natural Questions*, originally Book 7 (*QNat*. 1.5.6 = FPL 2, p. 329 Blänsdorf = p. 357 Courtney) – should be read in light of Seneca's controversial relationship to the emperor at this crucial and dramatic stage in his career. When trying to show (*against his adversarius fictus*) that water drops are not iridescent by virtue of the same phenomenon which produces the colors of rainbow – for drops "take on the color, not the image" of the sun (*colorem, non imaginem ducunt*) – Seneca quotes the following hexameter by Nero, a delicate depiction of Venus' epiphany (possibly borrowed from Nero's lost Troica): "the collar of the Cytheran's dove shines when it moves" (*colla Cytheriacae splendent agitata columbae*). Seneca's purpose is to argue that, just like water drops, the shining feathers of doves and peacocks reflect a different – second-rate – phenomenon than the rainbow. Although Seneca praises Nero's verse as "most elegant" (*disertissime*), a careful analysis of the intertextual stratification of Seneca's quotation and its intellectual framework demonstrates that this is not just one among Seneca's several homages to the princeps (cf. e.g., *QNat*. 6.8.3; 7.17.2; 21.3). On the one hand, Nero's own intertextual re-use of Lucretius (*DRN* 2.801-809) acquires a new meaning in a Senecan context which explicitly refutes the Lucretian theory of *simulacra* (*QNat*. 1.5.1-2). On the other hand, the inevitably ambiguous implications of Nero's association with Lucretius (and the Lucretian Venus) become even more ambiguous in light of the fact that Nero's poetic work is cited to illustrate the lower significance of the case of gloating birds, which are said to be unable to mirror the image of the sun. This is an extremely meaningful detail in the case of an emperor-poet who, as emphatically announced in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* (4.1.21-32; cf. also Suet. *Ner*. 53), intended to be like Apollo "in face and lovely grace" (*similis vultu similisque decore*). It is even possible that Seneca's adverb *disertissime*

maliciously echoes the (by Nero's time iconic) wittiness of Catullus' antiphrastic praise of Cicero as "the most eloquent of the descendants of Romulus" (*disertissime Romuli nepotum*, 49.1). Certainly, in the eyes of the attentive Roman reader, Seneca's eulogistic quotation could easily turn into an intertextually pregnant criticism.

**10. Francesca Romana Berno** (La Sapienza, Rome, francescaromana.berno@uniroma1.it)

**"Self-Reflections: Philosophical Use of Mirror in Seneca *NQ* 1.17 and Phaedrus 3.8."**

The end of Book 1 of Seneca's *NQ* is a rewriting of the 'know thyself' narrative, in a variation which implies the use of the mirror as a tool for the examination of conscience. This is interesting both on an intratextual and intertextual level. Indeed, this passage follows the obscene story of Hostius Quadra, also focused on mirrors (*NQ* 1.16), thus giving a double-faced view on the use of this instrument of which we may find traces also in 1.17. This reading might be enlightened by an intertextual perspective with a story by Phaedrus, in which we also find gender specificity. The two passages belong to a list of different versions of this anecdote. Seneca takes all of them into account, and enriches his version providing a moralized story of the invention and use of mirrors.

**11. George Prekas** (University College Dublin, prekasg@tcd.ie)

**"God through his Myriad Stars: the Celestial and the Divine in Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones* and Manilius' *Astronomica*."**

In this talk I explore the way Seneca interrelates the kosmos of the stars with the concept of divinity within the wider context of his Naturales Quaestiones, and how the Stoic philosopher's terminology and ideas might have been influenced by Manilius' didactic poem on astrology, the *Astronomica*. Although the two works are, of course, different in nature and objectives (prose; Stoic natural philosophy VS poetry; astrology), there are numerous overlapping themes (e.g., creationism, fate, condemnation of *luxuria*), common imagery, and lexical echoes that invite comparison them. Being an astrological poem, the *Astronomica* strives to hammer home the message that the orderly movements of the celestial bodies constitute proof for the existence of God and that astrology itself is a God-given gift, enabling mankind to approach the divine through the studies of the stars. Seneca's *NQ*, on the other hand, while having a broader scope (nature in general, with a moral objective), seems to give pride of place to the investigation of heavens and the study of stars, though this is taken for granted and only tangentially referred to. The Stoic philosopher does not reject the idea that the celestial bodies influence the lives of men in some way, yet he dismisses the type of astrology espoused by Manilius, according to which the constellations and the planets inexorably shape the fates of individuals. Nonetheless, as I argue, this does not prevent him from borrowing from Manilius' astrological poem whatever suits his own work and distinct philosophical purposes. Ultimately, for both authors, the array of stars above us is sufficient proof of God's existence.