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Greek *exempla* in Seneca's *De tranquillitate animi*

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Abstract

Seneca's *On Tranquillity of Mind* contains many *exempla* that are nested within the Greek cultural context. Most commonly, the author presents the conduct of two famous Greek philosophers (Socrates and Diogenes) as model behaviour for the young Stoic Seneca during his various struggles with mental unrest. Seneca's other Greek *exempla* are not so comprehensive. By way of these stories, Seneca illustrates several life situations that someone can find themselves in, such as coping with loss of property or life (Zeno and Theodorus), the roles of crying and laughter in life (Heraclitus and Democritus), the harmful influence of alcohol (Solon and Arcesilaus), the importance of certain prerequisite personality traits for involvement in politics (Isocrates and Ephorus), the insecurity of royal status (Croesus), and the fate of good people (Heracles). All these *exempla* from *On Tranquillity of Mind* have an ethical-educational character, serving as models of conduct for novice Stoics and helping them to overcome difficulties in everyday decision-making.

Key Words: *exemplum*, Seneca, *On Tranquillity of Mind*, Stoicism

The philosophical work of Lucius Annaeus Seneca has several characteristic compositional and linguistic features. In addition to the innovative writing style and the use of so-called language of interiority,¹ one of the most distinctive features of Seneca's philosophical work is the thoughtful use of *exempla*. Matthew Roller writes: 'By "*exemplum*" I mean a narrative of or reference to an action that has been performed by a social actor before the eyes of members of his or her community, that has been judged by that audience of spectators to be notable "good" or "bad"...' ² As such, the *exemplum* should evoke similar associations in all readers. For instance, when Seneca describes the death of Cato the Younger in *On Tranquillity of Mind*, contemporary readers know what the author means to imply, namely that unjust death often happens to good people.³

As mentioned by R.G. Mayer, 'the imitation of examples is a practice central to Roman social life, moral behaviour and literary production'.⁴ There are three main reasons why moral *exempla* played an important role in Roman culture. Firstly, imitation was central to the moral experience of Romans. Roman training and education, both in the civil and military spheres, was based on following and imitating models.⁵ Secondly, the choice of stories to emulate was virtually inexhaustible. Authors could allude to countless well-known examples from ancient ancestors, or even stories that occurred in the recent past. Thirdly, Roman tradition encouraged people to create similar *exempla* in their own life that could become lessons for future generations of Romans.⁶

¹ See Williams (2015) 135 – 149; Albrecht (2014) 699 – 744.

² Roller (2015) 81.

³ Sen. Tranq. 16.1; 16.4. When quoting and referencing the Latin text of Seneca's *On Tranquillity of Mind*, I used the John W. Basore edition (see Seneca (1932) 202 – 285).

⁴ Mayer (1991) 143.

⁵ The Roman educational system was based on imitating the conduct of the best men (Lat. *tirocinium fori*). When Roman youths first donned the toga (*toga virilis*), they often went to live for long periods with the families of famous politicians or orators. By observing and imitating these famous men, they learned to follow the principles of this class of society. For example, Cicero relates that he was sent to be educated by Quintus Mucius Scaevola for a time (Cic. Amic. 1.1). In the military arena, men often lived together in a tent (Lat. *contubernium*), and young aristocrats served under the leadership of more experienced commanders to learn military craft from them (Tac. Ag. 5.1). This principle was also applied in philosophy. For example, Seneca says: 'It was not the classroom of Epicurus, but living together under the same roof, that made great men of Metrodorus, Hermarchus, and Polyaeus' (*Metrodorum et Hermarchum et Polyaeum magnos viros non schola Epicuri sed contubernium fecit*) (Sen. Ep. 6.6; Trans. Seneca (1925a) 29; Mayer (1991) 143).

⁶ Mayer (1991) 146 – 147.

On a philosophical level, the Roman emphasis on imitating models was connected to the concept of the 'Stoic sage' (Gr. σοφός; Lat. *sapiens*), which provided a model of human moral behaviour in various difficult life situations. The Stoic sage personified a lofty, noble ideal of moral conduct, and therefore possessed a number of positive characteristics: he never succumbed to passions; he was not proud or rash; he was always sincere, god-like, and free; he did not get drunk; he was engaged in political life.⁷

However, Seneca was well aware that meeting such an ideal person was unlikely in the period when he lived.⁸ For this reason, Roman Stoics often brought up ancient examples of such conduct. For novice Stoics, who were still only walking on the path towards wisdom (Gr. προκόπτοντες; Lat. *proficientes*), the deeds of the sages served as model examples to follow in their lives. Stoic thinkers often likened these personalities to various mythological figures (Odysseus, Heracles) or philosophers (Socrates, Diogenes).⁹ Stoic students were trained to cope with difficult life situations by repeatedly carrying out exercises that recalled the actions of these men. If a man could pass similar tests, he may also be included in the pantheon of perfect men in the future. Seneca openly expresses this idea in his 98th letter to Lucilius: 'Let us also, therefore, carry out some courageous act of our own accord; let us be included among the ideal types of history' (*Nos quoque aliquid et ipsi faciamus animose; simus inter exempla*).¹⁰

In the present study, we carry out a conceptual analysis of Greek examples from Seneca's *De tranquillitate animi*, which was written between 49 and 62 CE¹¹ and in which Seneca provides his friend Annaeus Serenus with philosophical advice to help him cope with mental unrest. As a true Stoic, Serenus feels drawn towards the political life of the empire, but he sees a tension between the possibilities that such a life offers (wealth, fame, recognition) and the problems that inherently come with it (overwork, fear for life during tyrannical regimes, moral decline). This inner conflict causes a state

⁷ See D. L. 7.117 – 125.

⁸ See Sen. *Ira* 2.10.6; *Const.* 2.1 – 3.

⁹ See Epict. *Diss.* 4.1.151 – 169; *Aur. Med.* 8.3.

¹⁰ Sen. *Ep.* 98.13; *Trans. Seneca* (1925b) 127.

¹¹ Mutschler (2014) 153.

of confusion and unrest, which Seneca, as a ‘physician’ (*medicus*), seeks to treat with various philosophical recommendations.¹²

For example, Seneca mentions the exemplary behaviour of various well-known characters, suggesting that Serenus look to them as role models in his own psychological experience.¹³ *On Tranquillity of Mind* contains many *exempla*, which can be classified in various ways. From a cultural point of view, Seneca’s *exempla* can be divided into Greek (Socrates, Diogenes) and Roman (Cato the Younger, Julius Canus). In terms of content, his *exempla* are both philosophical (Theodorus, Democritus) and historical (Pompeius, Ptolemy). From a temporal standpoint, the author mentions examples from ancient ancestors (Socrates, Bion) as well as some involving contemporary figures (Julius Canus, Sejanus). With regards to didactics, he gives both positive (Diogenes, Democritus) and negative examples (Demetrius, Heraclitus). From the viewpoint of fictionality, some examples relate the behaviour of real characters (Socrates, Cato the Younger), while others deal with mythological figures (Heracles). The Greek *exempla*, which are discussed in detail in the present text, thus constitute only a subsection within a much broader typological framework of examples.

In *De tranquillitate animi*, Seneca mentions the names of twelve figures with a Greek intellectual background who displayed typical Stoic conduct: Socrates, Isocrates, Ephorus, Diogenes, Croesus, Zeno, Theodorus, Democritus, Heraclitus, Heracles, Solon, and Arcesilaus. Practically all *exempla* from the Greek cultural context are mentioned as part of larger compositional units that also include examples from the Roman cultural environment.¹⁴ When considering any given problem, Seneca usually refers to a Greek figure before naming an analogous protagonist from the Roman cultural sphere. For example, he considers the conduct of Socrates to be comparable to that of Cato the Younger or Manius Curius Dentatus. Zeno and Theodorus are likened to Julius Canus, while Bion and Diogenes are presented as positive *exempla* and contrasted with the negative example of Pompey’s freedman Demetrius.¹⁵ In fact,

¹² In the ethical teachings of many ancient schools of philosophy, it was common to compare philosophers to physicians who treat moral defects. Seneca repeatedly returns to the medical metaphor (see Sen. Ira 1.15.1; Ep. 7.1; 104.18; 115.6).

¹³ This technique is known as ‘contemplation of the ideal sage’. See Robertson (2020) 123 – 134.

¹⁴ It may even be a systematic goal of Seneca’s to use *exempla* from the domestic Roman context (see Sen. Ad Polyb. 15.2).

¹⁵ Sen. Tranq. 16.1; 5.2 – 5; 14.3 – 10; 8.3 – 8.

Seneca often presents entire lists of similar examples; *exempla* are rarely found alone. Grouping into pairs is quite common, but larger catalogues of *exempla* often occur in the text.¹⁶ This iterative technique increases the allusive character of the given examples, and readers can choose which of the listed stories is most relevant to them.

When choosing Greek *exempla*, Seneca most often refers to the specific conduct of famous Greek philosophers, who are intended to serve as models for the young Stoic Serenus in his own struggle with mental unrest in its various forms. The first such figure is Socrates (470–399 BCE), to whom Seneca devotes the most attention in the text, directly referring to him three times.¹⁷ The first example involving Socrates reminds Serenus that, even when political activity is impossible due to oppression by state powers, people can engage publicly in other ways and need not remain completely passive. This is what Socrates did during the rule of the thirty tyrants, which began in Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War (404–403 BCE) and was characterised by immense cruelty.¹⁸ Seneca says: ‘Yet Socrates¹⁹ was in their midst [*i.e.* during the reign of the thirty tyrants] and comforted the mourning city fathers, he encouraged those that were despairing of the state, reproached the rich men that were now dreading their wealth with a too late repentance of their perilous greed, while to those willing to imitate him he carried round with him a great example, as he moved a free man among thirty masters’.²⁰ Of course, another dimension of Socrates’ admirable conduct concerns his death in prison in 399 BCE. Seneca uses this *exemplum* to remind Serenus that even good people can meet unfortunate ends because the snares of unpredictable fate are simply unavoidable. However, true Stoics should not mourn such sad ends because it was thanks to their admirable life and brave deaths that such personalities achieved immortality by becoming role models for subsequent generations of Romans.²¹ The

¹⁶ There are a number of similar lists in *On Tranquillity of Mind*: Croesus – Jugurtha – Ptolemy – Mithridates (Sen. Tranq. 11.12); Socrates – Rutilius – Pompeius – Cicero – Cato (Sen. Tranq. 16.1); Heracles – Regulus – Cato (Sen. Tranq. 16.4); Socrates – Cato – Scipio (Sen. Tranq. 17.4).

¹⁷ Other than these three examples, Seneca also mentions Socrates in the 7th chapter (Sen. Tranq. 7.5), but not as an *exemplum*.

¹⁸ See Krentz (1982).

¹⁹ During the reign of the thirty tyrants Socrates stood up against the execution of Leon of Salamis. In Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, this story is mentioned as one of two incidents in Socrates' life when the philosopher disobeyed the unjust rulings of the Athenian government (Pl. Ap. 32c-d).

²⁰ *Socrates tamen in medio erat et lugentis patres consolabatur et desperantis de re publica exhortabatur et divitibus opes suas metuentibus exprobrabat seram periculosae avaritiae paenitentiam et imitari volentibus magnum circumferebat exemplar, cum inter triginta dominos liber incederet* (Sen. Tranq. 5.2; Trans. Seneca (1932) 233).

²¹ Sen. Tranq. 5.3; 16.1.

third level of Socrates' conduct, according to Seneca, is less often emphasized and concerns his lack of shame and his ability to distract himself with an activity that is at first glance unbecoming of a respectable philosopher, namely playing with small boys.²² With this example, Seneca shows that even famous people like Socrates were aware that recreational activities—such as banal games, drinking wine, and dancing—are necessary for healthy development in overworked people.²³

The second figure, who is discussed in more detail, is the Cynic philosopher Diogenes (ca. 412 or 404–323 BCE). The author uses this *exemplum* to reflect on the proper handling of property. Diogenes represents the prototype of a happy person who, thanks to poverty, has become completely independent and free from all external factors.²⁴ Seneca even compares him to the gods, because even they have no property, no gardens or land, and yet we consider them blessed.²⁵ As a concrete example of such conduct, he cites the well-known anecdote about Diogenes and his slave Manes. Seneca says: 'But the only slave Diogenes had run away from him once, and, when he was pointed out to him, he did not think it worthwhile to fetch him back. "It would be a shame", he said, "if Diogenes were unable to live without Manes when Manes is able to live without Diogenes". But he seems to me to have cried: "Fortune, mind your own business; Diogenes has now nothing of yours. My slave has run away—nay, it is I that have got away free"'!²⁶

The other Greek philosophical *exempla* are more minimalist in character. An interesting *exemplum* from the philosophical environment is the pairing of Zeno and Theodorus.

²² This anecdote is presented in Valerius Maximus (V. Max. 8.8 ext. 1).

²³ Sen. Tranq. 17.4.

²⁴ Sen. Tranq. 8.4.

²⁵ Sen. Tranq. 8.5. The ideal of an ethical life is to approach divine life. This means that bliss can be achieved by preferring the conduct and qualities of the gods. Since the gods own nothing, are not dressed in expensive clothes, no one knows them, and they carry everything themselves, it is unnecessary to follow the path of accumulating property, buying expensive clothes, showing off, or being carried on couches by many slaves (see Sen. Ep. 31.10).

²⁶ *At Diogeni servus unicus fugit nec eum reducere, cum monstraretur, tanti putavit. 'Turpe est', inquit, 'Manem sine Diogene posse vivere, Diogenem sine Mane non posse'. Videtur mihi dixisse: 'Age tuum negotium, fortuna; nihil apud Diogenem iam tui est. Fugit mihi servus, immo liber abii'!* (Sen. Tranq. 8.7; Trans. Seneca (1932) 243). This story of Diogenes, who owned the slave Manes, is probably one of the oldest of Diogenes' *chreia*—moral maxims expressed using poignant anecdotes. It is intended to show that man does not need a slave to live, because he can take care of himself without the help of another (see Cepko, Kalaš, Suvák (2016) 334).

The first story concerns Zeno,²⁷ the founder of Stoicism, who remained calm when faced with the news that he had lost all his possessions after being shipwrecked.²⁸ The second anecdote concerns the philosopher Theodorus,²⁹ who responded as follows to a tyrant's threat to kill him without burial: "“You have the right”, he replied, “to please yourself, you have within your power only a half pint of my blood; for as to burial, you are a fool if you think it makes any difference to me whether I rot above ground or beneath it””.³⁰ The intent of both stories was to motivate Serenus to calmly deal with misfortune and loss of life or property. For Seneca, property is one of the most important areas to which philosophical reflection should be devoted. He even says that this matter is ‘the greatest source of human sorrow’ (*maximam humanarum aerumnarum materiam*), even greater than ‘deaths, illnesses, fears, longings, the endurance of pains and labours’ (*mortes, aegrotationes, metus, desideria, dolorum laborumque patientiam*).³¹

As another pairing of philosophers, Seneca presents Heraclitus and Democritus, who symbolise two opposing ways of dealing with mental turmoil. While Democritus represents the laughing philosopher, Heraclitus is the image of the constantly weeping philosopher.³² Seneca considers sad people or crying or to be one of the main factors contributing to mental unrest. For this reason, he encourages Serenus, when looking for friends, to avoid people ‘who are melancholy and bewail everything, who find pleasure in every opportunity for complaint’ (*tristes et omnia deplorantes, quibus nulla non*

²⁷ Zeno (ca. 333–262 BCE) was the founder of Stoicism. Only fragments of his work survive. This story about the shipwreck can be found in Diogenes Laertius (D. L. 7.5).

²⁸ Sen. Tranq. 14.3.

²⁹ Theodorus of Cyrene (ca. 340–250 BCE) was a well-known figure from the Cyrene school. He was a pupil of Aristippus and was given the nickname ‘the Atheist’ because of his attacks against religion. He worked as a diplomat in the service of Ptolemy I Soter. It was in this capacity that he came to the court of Alexander's diodochus Lysimachus, who ruled in Thrace, Macedonia, and Asia Minor. It was apparently in the court of this ruler that the event described took place (see Cic. Tusc. 1.43.102; 5.40.117).

³⁰ ‘Habet’, inquit, ‘cur tibi placeas, hemina sanguinis in tua potestate est; nam quod ad sepulturam pertinet, o te ineptum, si putas mea interesse, supra terram an infra putrescam’. (Sen. Tranq. 14.3; Trans. Seneca (1932) 269).

³¹ Sen. Tranq. 8.1; Trans. Seneca (1932) 241.

³² Heraclitus of Ephesus (ca. 535–475 BCE) was a famous pre-Socratic philosopher. The label ‘weeping philosopher’ became especially common in the Roman period. This epithet was partly based on an allusion to his famous statement that all things flow like a river. According to Plato, thinkers who believe this view are like people suffering from catarrh, who are plagued by incontinence and discharge (Pl. Cra. 440c). This is related to Theophrastus' opinion that Heraclitus suffers from melancholy (D.L. 9.6; Kirk, Raven (1957) 184). Democritus (ca. 460–370 BCE) was a proponent of atomistic philosophy. His designation as ‘the laughing philosopher’ is based on a tradition whereby he always appeared smiling in public and made fun of what others considered serious matters (see Sen. Ira 2.10.5).

causa in querellas placet).³³ On the other hand, laughter is a manifestation of optimism and zest for life; an expression of the successful treatment of mental unrest.³⁴ Therefore, it is considered more favourable to imitate Democritus rather than Heraclitus.³⁵ However, even the expression of joy has certain limits; for example, if a person rejoices at another's misfortune, they have exceeded the appropriate measure and are displaying 'inhuman pleasure' (*uoluptas inhumana*).³⁶

The last pair of Greek philosophical *exempla* are Solon and Arcesilaus.³⁷ These two authors appear in *On Tranquillity of Mind* as negative examples of people who drank alcohol to excess. However, Seneca does not consider this common opinion to be relevant, because both philosophers or sages had high moral credit, and without occasional drinking of alcohol, no art would have been created.³⁸ On the contrary, drinking alcohol in moderation frees the mind from the captivity of worries and gives it courage for all activities.³⁹

In addition to the philosophers mentioned above, the text also includes an *exemplum* featuring the Greek historian Ephorus, whom the orator Isocrates had to drag from the square by force, believing he would be more useful as an author of historical works.⁴⁰ With this story, Seneca demonstrates the importance of certain prerequisite personality traits for involvement in politics. Unlike orthodox Stoicism, Seneca also factors in the innate character of individuals when considering public participation. In this matter, he is probably building on the philosophy of the Stoic Panaetius.⁴¹ Indeed, Seneca, like

³³ Sen. Tranq. 7.6.

³⁴ Sen. Tranq. 15.3.

³⁵ Sen. Tranq. 15.2.

³⁶ Sen. Tranq. 15.5.

³⁷ Solon (ca. 630–560 BCE) was a respected Athenian lawgiver and poet. In one surviving fragment of his work (fr. No. 26), he admits to loving wine. Arcesilaus (316/315–241/240 BCE) was the scholarch of the Platonic Academy in the middle of the third century BCE.

³⁸ Sen. Tranq. 17.11.

³⁹ Sen. Tranq. 17.8.

⁴⁰ Sen. Tranq. 7.2. Isocrates (436–338 BCE) was one of the most respected Greek orators and the political opponent of Demosthenes. Ephorus of Cyme (ca. 400–330 BCE) was a pupil of Isocrates. Ephorus' *magnum opus* was a set of 29 books recounting a universal history.

⁴¹ Panaetius (ca. 185–110/109 BCE) theorised that nature had imparted every human being with four basic 'characters' (*personae*). The general character concerns the person as a member of the human species, with the common trait of every person being rationality. The second character considers individual variations among human individuals. Someone may stand out as having 'a large fund of wit' (*lepos*), while another may be characterised by 'seriousness' (*severitas*). The third character concerns life situations that arise by chance and over which we thus have no direct influence—we are born into them, so to speak. The fourth character represents matters that we determine ourselves through our free

Panaetius, admits that some people, such as Ephorus, simply do not have the necessary predispositions to engage in public life.⁴² For this reason, they should devote themselves to other activities.

Another non-philosophical *exemplum* is related to the last Lydian king Croesus, who ruled approx. 585–546 BCE and is listed first among the names of several other kings (Jugurtha – Ptolemy – Mithridates). What unites all these monarchs is that, despite their privileged position, power, or wealth, their lives ended in desperate circumstances.⁴³ According to Herodotus, after the Persians captured King Croesus, Cyrus ordered that a pyre be prepared, upon which the Lydian king was shackled. The Persians then began to light the fire. After Croesus quoted Solon from the pyre, Cyrus decided to free him and extinguish the fire. However, the Persian king did not succeed, and the flame was ultimately quenched by rain sent by the god Apollo at Croesus' request.⁴⁴ This *exemplum* aims to demonstrate that, in the time when Seneca lived, wealth, position, and even royalty were very fickle, and that people could become victims of the ruling regime from one day to the next. As such, people should learn from this story and always keep in mind that wealth, fame, and power cannot last forever, and that happiness based on status and material possessions can change at any time. The rule of fate can only be smashed by those who can foresee all these changes and thus prepare for them sufficiently.⁴⁵

The only Greek mythological figure mentioned in *On Tranquillity of Mind* is the Theban hero Heracles. From the countless stories about this character, Seneca chooses the moment of his unfortunate death, when he literally burned himself alive to end the

choice (e.g., the decision to study philosophy or law) (Cic. Off. 1.30.105 – 33.121; Trans. Cicero (1928) 109 – 111). See Rist (1969) 187 – 188. For more on the theoretical questions and discussions of the origins of Panaetius' theory, see De Lacy (1977).

⁴² Sen. Tranq. 6.2.

⁴³ Sen. Tranq. 11.12. Jugurtha was the king of Numidia, with whom the Romans fought long and difficult wars. He was later captured and executed by the Romans. Ptolemy was the king of Mauretania. In 40 CE, Emperor Caligula invited him to Rome, where he had prepared a friendly reception. However, the Emperor later had Ptolemy assassinated, allegedly because of the latter's wealth (see Suet. Cal. 35.1). Mithridates was the king of Armenia, appointed to this position by Emperor Tiberius. Around the year 37 CE, the new ruler Caligula had him arrested, but after the accession of Claudius in 42 CE, he was reinstated to the Armenian throne.

⁴⁴ Hdt. 1.86 – 87.

⁴⁵ Sen. Tranq. 11.12.

pain caused by his poisoned tunic.⁴⁶ Although such ends are tragic, Seneca believes we have no reason to mourn the fate of good people and worry the mind unnecessarily. On the contrary, people like Heracles achieved immortality through their own death. Through their conduct and brave deaths, they became *exempla* for the ages and therefore deserve our admiration rather than our tears over their unfortunate fate.

In conclusion, it is clear that all the Greek examples from *On Tranquillity of Mind* have an ethical and educational character, serving for novice Stoics as models of conduct in various life situations and helping them overcome difficulties in their practical decision-making. Taken together, the *exempla* represent one of the most original elements with which Roman authors enriched contemporary philosophical thinking, connecting Greek philosophical ideas into an accessible form, with the Roman emphasis on practice. Thus, contemporary readers were better able to accept philosophy as part of the Roman literary tradition.

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⁴⁶ Sen. Tranq. 16.4. According to legend, Heracles himself built a pyre on which he burned himself alive because of the excruciating pain he suffered after donning a tunic filled with poison (the blood of the centaur Nessus). The tunic was given to him by his wife Deianira, who was jealous of the hero's new love Iole and mistakenly believed that if she smeared his clothes with centaur blood, he would not stop loving her.

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