Seneca's Personification of the Passions

Maior pars mortalium, Pauline, de naturae malignitate conqueritur, quod in exiguum aeui gignimur, quod haec tam uelociter, tam rapide dati nobis temporis spatia decurrunt, adeo ut exceptis admodum paucis ceteros in ipso uitae apparatu uita desituat… Omnia licet quae umquam ingenia fulserunt in hoc unum consentant numquam satis hanc humanarum mentium caliginem mirabuntur.
The largest part of mortals, Paulinus, complain about the meanness of nature, because we are born into a little bit of time, because these courses of time surrendered for us run so swiftly, so rapidly, to such a degree that life leaves many in a lurch with very few exceptions in the preparation of life itself…Although all clever people who ever shone agree upon this one point, they never marvel enough at this darkness of human mind.

(Seneca, *De Brevitate Vitae*, I.I; III.I)

Although these two sentences are in separate passages of Seneca's *De Brevitate Vitae*, they encompass a holistic argument of Seneca's: people waste their lives because of their focus on passions, yet they continue to complain that life is too short. Before Seneca focuses on how to make the most of life in *De Brevitate Vitae,* he writes of the importance of both action and contemplation in *De Otio*. Several times he personifies passions, specifically anger in *De Ira* and *Medea* (Nussbaum 412, 454), and even life itself, as seen in *De Brevitate Vitae* I.I. By personifying life and time in *De Brevitate Vitae* making them the subjects of action verbs, Seneca emphasizes the power passions have over humans. This personification contributes to the loss of human agency passions produce. Therefore, Seneca advocates through his prose - grammar, syntax, and diction - that passions should be completely extirpated in order for humans to live a more controlled life.

Seneca begins *De Brevitate Vitae* explaining to Paulinus that many men complain life is too brief. Because humans, Seneca says, spend more of life preparing for something great or focusing on their external passions rather than simply living, life seems short: "the largest part of mortals, Paulinus, complain about the meanness of nature, because we are born into a little bit of time, because these courses of time surrendered for us run so swiftly, so rapidly, to such a degree that life leaves many in a lurch with very few exceptions in the preparation of life itself."

By using *decurrunt,* he emphasizes the urgency humans feel to live well. *Decurrunt* is the active from of *decurrere,* meaning "to run." In the same way, the use of *destituat,* which means "to leave in a lurch" implies that life itself chooses to run swiftly and leave humans confused by its absence. These two vocabulary choices personify time, implying that it actively runs around humans, rather than humans running through life purposefully. Therefore, life and time are both personified by Seneca, much like anger and grief in *De Ira* and *Medea*.

Before time runs swiftly by us, we are *gignimur*, born into, only a little bit of it in the first place. The use of *gignimur* creates a sense of passivity in humans just as *decurrunt* makes life more active. *Gignimur* is the deponent form of *gignere*, which in this specific sentence translates as "we are born into..." We (humans) complain that we are born into a little bit of time, over which we have no control. Time passes us by without so much as a second glance. On the other hand, anger seeks us out, like a lion stalking its prey or a "gathering of wild beasts" (Nussbaum 420). When examined together, time becomes the prey that we should be pursuing, while anger is the predator that stalks us until we succumb to its power. The use the active forms of verbs to describe the impact life, time, anger, and grief have on humans personifies them and gives them their own agency. In fact, these forces of love, anger, and grief are "stronger than any force of fire or swelling gale" (Nussbaum 454). According to Seneca, passions and emotions hold more power over us than any storm because the wriggle their way into our core so that "passions may operate beneath the level of consciousness" (Nussbaum 454-55). This, therefore, makes it difficult to extirpate them, but all the more necessary to do so.

The agency of individual emotions is reinforced by using the genitive possessive forms of *temporis*, time, and *humanarum mentium,* human mind. The possessive form of time, *temporis,* owns the course that runs through the life of humans. Seneca is implying that humans do not own

time, which means we cannot fully control it. Similarly, *humanarum mentium caliginem* means the human mind owns the darkness at which we do not marvel enough. The idea of ownership in these two passages represent that time and darkness are something outside of ourselves, external beings that are not ingrained within us. This is reinforced by Nussbaum when she says, "[t]hus aggression grows not inside our nature, but out of an interaction between nature and conditions…" (421). The condition of our life starts to shape us through its own devices, which further removes our agency. Here we begin to see why Seneca insists that we need completely remove all external influences of anger, greed, lust, grief, and similar attributes. It is anger specifically that he creates to be human, something that may begin in our souls but soon becomes something outside of ourselves, uncontrollable and vile.

Throughout her commentary on *De Ira*, Martha Nussbaum frequently discusses the power of the passions to overtake a person's life. About Seneca's thoughts regarding anger, she says, "in personifying anger, he invariably chooses images that portray it as in its very nature excessive and uncontrolled…" (419). Similarly, grief is personified in *Medea*: "[l]ight is the grief that can deliberate prudently and conceal itself: great sufferings do not hide…" (155-56). "Uncontrolled," "deliberate," and "conceal" each indicate actions that require intentional movements and motives. Saying anger and grief do these things removes human agency while creating human characteristics for anger and grief. No longer do we exert control over our own anger and grief, but these emotions choose our actions for us. *De Brevitate Vitae* conveys the same idea with life and time. Running is an animalistic verb, usually one associated with prey or urgency; it is an action verb, like conceal, that requires specific design to accomplish the task. Only humans or animals can perform tasks with an intentionality in a way described by these

verbs, which further contributes to the personification of life and time. As a result of this swift running of time, we are left in a lurch, staggering about like a drunkard without direction.

In our confusion, *malignitate,* meanness, and *caliginem,* darkness, have a better foothold to overtake our souls, as described in *De Brevitate Vitae* I and III. Life itself has a meanness that creates the darkness within the human mind. This meanness is a choice of the personified Life, and the natural human reaction to this terror in the night is a passionate one, screaming and fighting until the unseen enemy is brought down. However, Seneca argues we do not need passions to react to this *humanarum mentium caliginem*. Instead, we are to aim for *humanitas* - doing the morally virtuous deed solely for the betterment of humanity rather than any internal anger. To do so, we must separate ourselves from the situation and "remov[e] barriers that stand between oneself and one's fellow citizens" (Nussbaum 429). Our passions are the barriers that elevate external circumstances far past the point they belong, as seen in *Medea*. Nussbaum writes, "Medea's emotions – love, grief, anger – fundamentally involve the assignment of high value to external objects and situations" which exemplifies Seneca's hatred of the external influences in our lives. It is through the attention to these passions that life melts away, evident in *De Brevitate Vitae* I.IV when Seneca says, "*ubi nulli bonae rei impenditur*." For no good thing, life is expended; we waste it on passions that steal our agency.

To ensure humans do not drown in our passions, Seneca insists human discipline reclaims our life that otherwise falls by the wayside. Our drowning begins when we actually allow our agency to be lost in the first place, supported by Seneca writing, "*non accipimus breuem uitam sed facimus*" – we do not receive a short life, but we make it so (I.IV). Both verbs in this sentence (*accipimus* and *facimus*) are present active indicative forms. The subject is *we,* the humans, that choose to make our life short. By using the active form of the verbs in this

sentence, shortly after he utilized the passive form to describe humans, Seneca creates a juxtaposition regarding our agency. At first, we choose how to spend our life. The more we allow passions into our life, the less agency we have – the turbulent seas begin to overtake us. Such is seen with Medea, who loved Jason properly, yet this love bore anger and grief. Furthermore, the one guy who holds insatiable greed or pays painstaking attention to superfluous labors is tormented by his passions (*De Brevitate Vitae*, II.II). Shortly after this passage, Seneca lists numerous external things that snatch a person's time, everything from a mistress to a dutiful running around for the city (*De Brevitate Vitae*, III.II). External passions, therefore, become a disease and a thief of our time making the decision, much as a human would, to remove themselves from our grasp, which purposefully creates chaos in a person's mind.

The rescue from the seas fraught with the dangers of passion, argues Seneca, is detachment. In *Medea*, "Seneca forces us to see that it is the one who loves properly, loyally, the one who really understands what it is to value a commitment to an external object, is who will be most derailed by a loss...and driven mad by grief and anger" (Nussbaum 446). To not feel this anger, we must realize the darkness of the human mind then remove ourselves from it. Our mind is deceitful, owning a darkness outside itself that it cannot control. The darkness purposefully chooses to be darkness. Because of this, Seneca continually argues for more discipline in life: "by discipline it thrives, so our lifespan greatly increases for the one mapping it out well" (*De Brevitate Vitae*, II.IV). "Mapping it out well" requires complete extirpation of passion because we cannot stop passion from excess once it begins, like the tide rising on an oblivious beachcomber. The Chorus in *Medea* supports this, singing, "excessive passions, when they come, bring neither good fame nor virtue to men" (627-31). Only disaster and a short life await

those who indulge in external passions, according to Seneca, because the passions themselves have as much agency as the human attempting to control them.

The applicability of these ideas is questionable; however, the *modus operandi* by which Seneca tries to explain his argument is effective. By first personifying life itself through active verbs and possessive genitives, Seneca shows that external circumstances remove human agency. His suggestion to fix this disease is to detach ourselves from anger and love because these passions become the unrestrained sea that wreaks havoc on our lives. Only by avoiding the water entirely can we ensure we will never drown.

Works Cited

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