The works of L. Annaeus Seneca cannot be dated with any great precision. This is frustrating, since the interpretation and understanding of his immense and wide-ranging output would benefit from a precise chronological sequence. The works themselves resist any such systematization, however: Seneca makes very few references to his personal circumstances, which is appropriate considering his philosophical emphasis on the inner life, and this reticence has led one scholar to ask ironically, “Est-il possible de ‘dater’ un traité de Sénèque?” Nevertheless, some headway is possible, and Giancotti (1957) on the Dialogues, Abel (1967) and Griffin (1976) on all the prose works, and Fitch (1981) and Nisbet (1995: 293–311) on the tragedies have made significant advances in understanding the dates of Seneca’s literary writings. This chapter seeks to integrate the conclusions of these studies.

When something can be said in relation to a landmark event in Seneca’s life, it is often limited to terminus ante or post quem: his exile to Corsica following the accession of Claudius in AD 41 (Dio 60.8.5); his recall to serve as personal tutor to Nero in AD 49 (Tac. ann. 12.8.2); his rise to prominence on Nero’s accession in AD 54 (ann. 13.2.1); his diminished influence following the murder of Agrippina in AD 59 (ann. 14.14.2); and his withdrawal from all influence with Nero in AD 62 (ann. 14.52.1). Within the spans bounded by these points, a generally coherent picture emerges.

There are of course many methodological issues associated with assigning dates (both relative and absolute) to literary works. Internal references, stylistic features, external testimonia, and other factors may be employed to argue for a date, and different types of argument will carry different weights with different readers. Crucially, circularity must be avoided, and interpretations of a work cannot presume a date for which evidence does not exist. It may be possible to perceive a development in thought from one work to the next, but that in itself cannot be used as an argument for the relative dates of the works in question. There is also a danger with this sort of analysis in assuming a tendency toward the limits: a given work that shows

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1 Grimal 1949a, and see also Griffin 1976: 5 n. 2.
indications of being written before AD 54, for example, does not need to have been written close to AD 54; the limits identify boundaries, but in most cases do not establish more or less likely dates within the possible range. Indeed, the opposite is true: as one approaches the limit, there is a greater need for independent, unrelated points of reference. While any two arbitrary facts touching on an author’s life may be close in time to one another (e.g., when a given work was written and an event recorded by Tacitus), it is improbable that such clusters will occur repeatedly, given how few data points survive. Agnosticism often remains the most prudent course. These issues are of course further confused if works are re-worked or re-edited following their initial circulation.² My hope here is not to overstate the case, but within each section to describe works in what may reasonably be thought to be chronological order, given the appropriate cautions offered below.

**Dialogues**

Ten treatises in twelve books, as found in the eleventh-century Ambrosian manuscript, are collectively known as **Dialogues** (Dialogi) and are numbered 1–12. The earliest of these, Ad Marciam de Consolatione (= dial. 6), probably dates to AD 39 or 40, although a later date into the 40s is possible.³ Seneca writes with authority to console Marcia, daughter of the historian A. Cremutius Cordus, on the death of her son Metilius three years earlier, and Seneca may have written works before this that are no longer extant. Reference to the republication of Cordus’s works (cons. Marc. 1.3), which occurred under Gaius (Suet. Cal. 16.1), establishes a terminus post quem.⁴ Further, praise of Tiberius (as is found in cons. Marc. 3.2, 15.3) “would not have been prudent before 39” (Griffin 1976: 397, citing Dio 59.16.4 and Suet. Cal. 30.2). For the upper limit of the range, Abel argued that it must be before Seneca’s exile, based on in qua istud urbe, di boni, loquimur? (cons. Marc. 16.2), which suggests both speaker and addressee are in Rome.⁵ This is not convincing: loquimur could equally be an epistolary conceit, whereby the letter creates the air of intimate communication, regardless of where the sender is; indeed, this effect would

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² E.g., Schmidt 1961.
³ For previous discussions, see Giancotti 1957: 45–73, Abel 1967: 159 f., Griffin 1976: 397, and references there.
⁴ Bellemore’s argument (1992) for an earlier, Tiberian date for the work requires rejecting Suetonius’s evidence.
⁵ Abel 1967: 159 f., and references there.