CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE REPRESENTATION AND ROLE OF BADNESS IN SENECA’S MORAL TEACHING:
A CASE FROM THE NATURALES QUAESTIONES (NQ 1.16)

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1. Introduction

This chapter will focus on an elaborate portrayal of a peculiar case of depravity in the work of the philosopher Seneca. This case is so eye-catching that it immediately raises the question of its function(s). Seneca is of obvious interest to a student of ‘badness’. Moral evil is strongly present in his philosophical work, frowned upon, of course, yet also painted in broad colors. This fact has raised some questions: Seneca, the avowed combatant of vice, sometimes seems to indulge overly in his descriptions of morally reprehensible behavior.

The case central to this chapter occurs in Seneca’s Naturales Quaestiones (NQ). In this work composed of several books, Seneca inquires into the causes of certain natural phenomena. Moralizing passages written in a strongly rhetorical style introduce and conclude the different books. Several of these prefaces and epilogues contain descriptions of perverted and decadent behavior. In NQ 1, Seneca explains how the rainbow and several fiery heavenly phenomena come about. The rainbow appears to be caused by mirroring: it is said to be a reflection of the sun formed in a moist cloud. The last two chapters of the book discuss the theme of mirroring from a moral point of view. In chapter 17, Seneca explains that nature had not invented mirrors for those decadent usages to which mankind now put them; instead, mirrors had originally been given to man so that he might achieve knowledge of himself.

1 See also the chapter by Wilcox in this volume.
and the world. There follows a description of the gradual evolution in
the misuse of the mirror for the purpose of luxury. Seneca concludes
this episode by saying that in his day mirrors are not only used for the
purpose of luxury and adornment: they have become indispensable for
every vice (1.17.10). This sentence refers back to the previous chapter.
Indeed, in chapter 16 Seneca has told the story—or fabella, as he calls
it (1.16.1)—of Hostius Quadra’s misuse of mirrors for the purpose of
his sexual satisfaction, as a tool in his couplings with men and women
alike. Magnifying mirrors enable Hostius Quadra to see the part of his
actions that he cannot see by means of his eyes alone, and moreover
they amplify the images.

2. The problem and its solutions

Seneca describes Hostius Quadra’s misdemeanor in such detail that
through the ages scholars took exception to the passage. The omis-
sion of this chapter from the text of a 1794 edition (Ruhkopf), allegedly
because it was not necessary to the argumentation of the book, may
well have been triggered by the scabrous content of the passage.
Modern scholarship, too, finds the description problematic, but it deals with
the problem in more cautious ways. In his recent monograph on the
Naturales Quaestiones, Gauly has formulated the central scholarly con-
cern. He speaks of:

Ein Problem…das die Interpreten seit sehr langer Zeit beschäftigt hat,
die Frage nämlich, ob nicht die breit entfaltete, detailreiche und anschau-
liche Darstellung den vorgeblichen Zweck der fabella, die Bekämpfung
des Lasters, desavouiert.

3 Cf. Gauly 2004, 125.
4 The decision of Ruhkopf is mentioned by Waiblinger 1977, 4 n. 28: ‘F.E. Ruhkopf,
L.A. Senecas physikalische Untersuchungen aus dem Lateinischen übersetzt und mit
Anmerkungen versehen, Erster Teil, Leipzig 1794, VII: (Nat. Quaest. I 16 ist ausgelassen)
„Übrigens kann es in Absicht auf den Zusammenhang vollkommen entbehrlich werden“.
However, it must be added that Ruhkopf’s remark may also be understood in the
context of the questions that have been raised about the composition of the Naturales
Quaestiones, and the place and function of the moralizing ‘inserts’ in the work. On
this question, see for instance the recent monographs of Berno 2003, Gauly 2004, and
Limburg 2007.
5 2004, 127. Gauly 2004, 127–128 mentions other scholars who have found NQ 1.16
problematic (cf. also 2004, 115).