Mera Homicidia: A Philosopher Draws Blood—Seneca and the Gladiatorial Games

In *ep. 7* of Book 1 of the *Epistulae Morales*, Seneca unexpectedly shifts from his abstract pedagogical stance as Lucilius' teacher to describe a recent personal experience. In search of some light entertainment and relaxation, he happened by chance to visit the gladiatorial games. His narration, which tells of the lunchtime events when condemned criminals were set against each other in a 'to-the death' combat,¹ is graphic and uncompromising. The events he describes are brutal, savage and cruel, with the audience itself implicated in the barbarism:


¹ The day of the games typically had a three-tiered structure. The *venationes* or beast hunts took place during the morning, the public execution of criminals (*noxii, cruciarii*) formed the lunchtime combats, while the *munera*, the main gladiatorial bouts between trained and skilled fighters, were held in the afternoon. See Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 64ff; Wiedemann (1992) 55.
By chance I attended a mid-day exhibition, expecting some fun, wit and relaxation, - an exhibition at which men’s eyes have respite from the slaughter of their fellow-men. But it was quite the reverse. The previous combats were the essence of compassion; but now all the trifling is put aside and it is pure murder. The men have no defensive armour. They are exposed to blows at all points, and no one ever strikes in vain. Many persons prefer this programme to the usual pairs and to the bouts ‘by request’. Of course they do; there is no helmet or shield to deflect the weapon. What is the need of defensive armour, or of skill? All these mean delaying death. In the morning they throw men to the lions and the bears; at noon, they throw them to the spectators. The spectators demand that the slayer shall face the man who is to slay him in his turn; and they always reserve the latest conqueror for another butchering. The outcome of every fight is death, and the means are fire and sword. This sort of thing goes on while the arena is empty. You may retort: ‘But he was a highway robber; he killed a man!’ And what of it? Granted that, as a murderer, he deserved this punishment, what crime have you committed, poor fellow, that you should deserve to sit and see this show? In the morning they cried ‘Kill him! Lash him! Burn him!’ Why does he meet the sword in so cowardly a way? Why does he strike so feebly? Why doesn’t he die game? Whip him to meet his wounds! Let

\footnote{The Latin text of the *Epistulae Morales* and Seneca’s *Dialogi* are taken from the Oxford Classical Texts series, edited by L.D. Reynolds.}
them receive blow for blow, with chests bare and exposed to the stroke!' And when the games stop for the intermission, they announce: 'A little throat-cutting in the meantime, so that there may still be something going on!'³

This passage is cited by M. Wistrand as the 'only one...that gives positive evidence that Seneca himself actually saw spectacular executions' (1990) 31 and it forms the pivot of his argument that, like most Romans of his time, Seneca enjoyed the gladiatorial games and was not opposed to their propagation. An important attribute that had previously always distinguished Seneca was his definite opposition to such events.⁴ M. Griffin, for example, is decisive about Seneca's 'abhorrence of gladiatorial shows (Ep.90.45; 95.33) and of the slaughter of criminals in the arena (Ep.7.2ff.)' (1976) 178 and she points out how it has sometimes been regarded as Seneca's influence that the games held by Nero in 57, to celebrate the opening of his new amphitheatre in the Campus Martius, ended with no one being killed (p. 69).⁵ V. Sørenson writes that Seneca 'is the first Roman known to have condemned the games' (1984) 144. Wistrand, however, considers such comments to be a misconception and a misreading of Seneca and he refers to the works of Augusta Hönle /Anton Henze (1981) and Georges Ville (1981) in support of his own argument (pp.43ff).

³ Translations of the *Epistulae Morales* are taken from R.M. Gummere's three volume edition of Seneca's letters in The Loeb Classical Library series. Acknowledgement is therefore made here for the many translations that occur in the following discussion.

⁴ Wistrand (1990) 42-3 supplies a brief survey of twentieth-century scholarship which notes Seneca's opposition to the gladiatorial games. Cagniart extends this list of those who support this 'distorted picture of Seneca's attitude toward the Roman games,' (2000) 610, fn.25.

⁵ Citing Suetonius, *Nero*, 12.1, Griffin comments that although 'Nero ordered that no one was to be killed...there is no warrant for thinking Nero made a habit of this mildness.' (1976) 72, fn.4.
Beginning with an ambivalent statement such as: ‘Seneca’s own practice as regards violent entertainment is somewhat unclear’, Wistrand then shifts to note how: ‘The great majority of Seneca’s allusions to the arena are made in a sympathetic tone’. Finally he states directly and without equivocation: ‘Seneca’s epist. 7 criticizes neither gladiatorial shows, nor executions of criminals... Actually, there is no direct criticism at all of gladiatorial shows as an institution in Seneca’s writings.’ With regard to this final statement, he has also specified how ‘epist. 7 is essential for understanding Seneca’s attitudes towards violence and entertainment’ (p.35). Wistrand then assures us that because his findings are based ‘on a study of all of Seneca’s works and not only a few well-known passages’, they therefore furnish ‘solid evidence for this new picture of Seneca’ (p.46). His argument, which does create a new contradictory view of Seneca, is not without persuasion and has, since the time of its publication, become an accepted view of Seneca. Yet, conceived under the influence of Hönlé/Henze and Ville, it is not perhaps such a close representation of Seneca’s writings as Wistrand suggests. His ‘new picture of Seneca’ may only be different. A reassessment of Wistrand’s conclusions would necessarily seem overdue.

The fundamental premise of Wistrand’s discussion is that Seneca was not only not opposed to the gladiatorial games, but that he was ‘favourably disposed towards especially gladiatorial shows’ (p.40). The games were ‘examples of virtus in the hour of danger’ and of entertainment pure and simple’ (p.42). Wistrand’s pursuit of this conclusion basically divides into three strands. In the first place, there is the distinction that can be made between usual gladiatorial fights (e.g.

6 Wistrand (1990) 32; 33; 37.
7 Auguet, whose argument has elements in common with that of Wistrand, is more cautious and qualifies Seneca’s attitude to the games as ‘exceedingly ambiguous,’ (1972 repr.2003) 192.
8 He writes of ‘the attitude that is condensed in the maxim per aspera ad astra. The highest good, virtus, cannot be reached without suffering and hardships such as illness, pain, poverty, exile, or even death.’ (1990) 40.
ordinariis paribus et postulaticiis, ep.7.3) and the noonday spectacle, which involved untrained criminals who struck at each other in desperate defence of their lives. Essentially, the spectacle at which Seneca was present was a form of public execution or, in gladiatorial terms, a *munus sine missione*, a combat from which no combatant could win pardon. To understand the significance of this, a brief sketch of the history and social context of the games is necessary.

Having been taken over from the Etruscans, the gladiatorial games were introduced into Rome in 264 BC, initially *as a funerary rite reserved to the aristocracy... The blood of gladiators was... shed for the dead.* Over time, the games gradually became regarded amongst the

---

9 See fn.1 above. Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 192-3 differentiates similarly. Seneca ‘takes care to distinguish between the gladiatorial combats in the real sense of the term and the summary massacres of which the arena was the scene during the midday interlude... Nothing is more false than generalizations based on the midday games.’ UnderScoring the same distinction, Wiedemann asserts that: ‘Seneca’s objection is not that they were cruel, but that they were boring and demonstrated no skill, “sine arte.”’ (1992) 141.

10 *Missio* was the decision made at the end of a gladiatorial combat (when one of the combatants was defeated) to spare the vanquished gladiator. The beaten man could either be sent back in safety out of the arena (*missus*) or put to death. In a combat *sine missione*, no reprieve was allowed. Auguet explains that: ‘Generally speaking, the verdict was not the product of arbitrary cruelty; it was dictated by a very rough sort of justice, a sort of “sporting” equity... Had the gladiator shown himself cowardly, or had he let the combat drag on ignobly, the crowd would have demanded his condemnation. But if he had fought well... or if luck had played a great part in his defeat, the loser had a good chance of being “sent back.”’ (1972 repr.2003) 51. The combat *sine missione* was one of the types of fighting prohibited by Augustus because of ‘its excessive cruelty’, Auguet (p. 61). See Suetonius, *Augustus*, 45.3; *Nero*, 4.3.

11 Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 19, 21. Futrell comments: ‘The choice of formalized combats as funeral performances was a directed one: the heirs of the deceased had a *munus*, or duty, to ease the transition between the world of the dead and the world of the living by providing the lubrication or sustenance of blood as a rite of passage. The blood spilt in ritualized combat guaranteed the
populace as valid and enjoyable entertainment (e.g. *ep.* 80.1)\(^{12}\) and often served as a means for their promoters (military and political leaders or emperors) to strengthen both their power and popularity.\(^{13}\) Gladiators were frequently condemned criminals or prisoners of war who were

community's continuity despite the passage of its leaders. Thus death is not an end but a transition, just as the empire itself does not end but continuously recreates itself anew.' (1997) 3. See also Wiedemann (1992) 1ff.

\(^{12}\) Auguet describes what he calls the 'secularization' of the games i.e. 'The rite becomes a spectacle.' (1972 repr.2003) 23.

\(^{13}\) See Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 25ff; Wiedemann (1992) 6ff and Köhne and Ewigleben (2000) 16ff. Auguet writes that 'from Augustus to Trajan, the emperors merely outbid one another in the splendour and number of feast-days. It was not enough to give games; it was also necessary to attend them and to show to advantage at them.' (1972 repr.2003) 185. cf. *Impetratum est quod postulabatur, oblatum quod non postulabatur. Institit ultro et ut concupisceeremus admonuit, ac sic quoque plura inopinata plura subita. Iam quam Ubera spectantium studia, quam securus favor!* (Pliny, *Panegyricus*, 33.2-3; 'Requests were granted, unspoken wishes were anticipated, and he did not hesitate to press us urgently to make fresh demands; yet still there was something new to surpass our dreams. How freely too the spectators could express their enthusiasm and show their preferences without fear!' The Latin text and translation of the *Panegyricus* are from the Loeb Classical Library edition of Pliny's *Letters and Panegyricus* by B. Radice, vol.2. Julius Caesar especially regarded the games as a powerful means in the furtherance of his own ambitions (See Köhne and Ewigleben (2000) 16-17; Cassius Dio, 43.23; Suetonius, *Julius Caesar*, 39; Plutarch, *J. Caesar*, 5.4; Pliny, *Natural History*, 33.53). For reference to the games of Pompey, see Cassius Dio, 39.38.1-4 (cf. Seneca, *De Brev.Vit.* 13.6; Pliny, *Natural History*, 7.19-22); for the games of Claudius, see Cassius Dio, 61.33.1; for the games of Titus, see Cassius Dio, 66.25.1-5, Suetonius, *Titus*, 7.3 and for the games of Trajan, see Cassius Dio, 68.15.1. Augustus is generally recognised as giving the gladiatorial games an important new role in the Roman ceremonial calendar (Suetonius, *Augustus*, 45.3 cf. Wiedemann, p. 41), although after Domitian (81-96 AD), the games could only be given at Rome by the emperors. Tiberius was the only emperor to show a real reluctance for the gladiatorial show, actually reducing the budget and number of bouts in a show (Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 47.1). For the attitude of Marcus Aurelius who was more ambivalent, see fnns. 42 and 69 below.
forced to fight, or else slaves who, having been bought by their masters for this reason, were trained in the gladiatorial schools (ep.70.20) and fought professionally. In fact, men convicted of capital offences could be either *damnatus ad ludum* i.e. condemned to the gladiatorial school (a life sentence)\(^\text{14}\) or *damnatus ad arenam* i.e. condemned (unarmed) to the arena to face a wild animal, a gladiator or another prisoner. This latter process was undeniably a death sentence.\(^\text{15}\) Trained gladiators were of various types with their own specialist skills,\(^\text{16}\) even as there were different kinds of combat (*venationes* or animal hunts; *naufragium*/*naumachiae* or mock sea battles, for example).

There were also, however, free men amongst the gladiators. These were generally men who were in desperate straits (for example bankrupts or those with a legal conviction). They sold themselves to an owner (*lanista*) for a fee (ep.99.13), thereby binding themselves to this

---

\(^\text{14}\) This was: ‘a penalty more lenient than execution: they had instead been sold to trainers who invested time and money to prepare them to fight with a variety of weapons...their training and equipment allowed them the opportunity to escape the complete debasement endured by persons condemned to execution,’ Shelton (2000) 93.

\(^\text{15}\) See Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 62ff; 93ff; 101ff; 113ff; 154ff; 181; Wiedemann (1992) 67ff; 102ff; Futrell (1997) 145-6; 190; Shelton (2000) 90-3. For the public nature of this punishment, see Futrell (p.47).

\(^\text{16}\) There was for example the *hoplomachus* (a gladiator armed with a long oblong shield) who was matched with the *Thraex* (Thracian) or the *retiarius* (who fought with a net and trident) and who was set against the *secutor* or *murmillo* (*mirmillo*), both of whom were heavily armed and less mobile. Auguet explains how: ‘It was indeed rare for two gladiators of similar class to fight each other. Each man had his own means of defence and his own technique, differing from that of his adversary, and it was this that partly provided the interest of a combat whose principle consisted just as much in matching two types of weapon as in matching two men.’ (1972 repr.2003) 47. Other types of gladiator were the *veles* (armed with a javelin), the *laquearius* (whose weapon was a lasso), the *bestiarius* (a wild-beast fighter or a criminal condemned to the beasts), the *paegnarii* (who used wooden weapons or whips) or the *essedarius*, the *andabate* and the *dimachaerus* (see Auguet, pp.46ff).
life by the gladiatorial oath or auctoramentum gladiatorium, a pledge by which a man sanctioned his own violent and horrible death, whether by burning, imprisonment, beating or the sword (i.e. ‘uri, uinciri, verberari, ferroque necari patior’, ep.37.2). At the same time, there were also some who were actually attracted to the gladiatorial life. This was not so common because, although the gladiator might be revered in the arena by his audience, he was, paradoxically, someone (possibly morally or financially ruined or a barbarian) outside the bounds of respectable Roman society (gladiatores, aut perditi homines aut barbari, Cicero, Tusculan Disputationes, 2.17.41 cf. Sen. Nat. Quaest. 7.32.3; Petronius, Satyricon, 126.11). They were ‘crude, loathsome, doomed, lost’ (the importunus, obscaenus, damnatus, perditus). The events in ep.7, which involve convicted criminals, are therefore the lowest form of combat, its participants the most degraded.

The second strand of Wistrand’s argument centres on what he considers ‘a comparatively high number’ of examples, similes, and

---


18 ‘Both gladiators and their trainers are declasse, and suffer infamia, the loss of their identity as respectable citizens. The contrast between the fame of individual gladiators and the infamia with which gladiators as a group were stigmatised is striking.’ Wiedemann (1992) 28. See Cicero, Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino, 3.8; 6.17; In Pisonem, 12.28; In Catilinam, 2.4.7; 2.4.9; 2.11.24 for the use of ‘gladiator’ and even the phrase ‘noble gladiator’ as a term of opprobrium and disgrace cf. ‘they doom them to ignominy and the loss of their rights as citizens... What perversity! They have pleasure in those whom yet they punish; they put all slights on those to whom, at the same time, they award their approbation; they magnify the art and brand the artist. What outrageous thing it is, to blacken a man on account of the very things which make him meritorious in their eyes!’ (Tertullian, De Spectaculis, 22.2-4). Wiedemann emphasises the Roman ‘revulsion at the tendency for free men, sometimes even free men of high status, to choose a career as a “professional” gladiator.’ (p.102 cf. ep.99.13). See also Futrell (1997) 245, fn.179.

metaphors from the arena’ in Seneca’s writings (1990) 32. These are, in his opinion, difficult to reconcile with an attitude of opposition because their usage typically depicted the gladiator as a man of fortitude, courage and unflinching determination (cf. Cicero, Tusculan Disputations, 2.17.41), his combat in the arena analogous to the Stoic struggle in life to practise the art of living virtuously and according to reason. Seneca’s references to the gladiatorial life actually enhance the qualities of the Stoic proficiens or sapiens.

For the third strand of his argument, Wistrand turns to the philosophical import of ep.7 (pp.36-7). The opening theme, which centres on Lucilius’ question to Seneca about what he (Lucilius) should take particular care to avoid (Quid tibi vitandum praecepue existimes quaeris? ep.7.1), could not be better exemplified than by the narrative of sections 3-6. Seneca’s answer, which was made without hesitation, at once specified the crowd (turbam), an environment to which Seneca considers Lucilius can not yet entrust himself safely (Nondum illi tuto committeris). For the Stoic disciple, struggling with his own philosophical purpose and rectitude, a crowd can be a morally dangerous place: ‘If he expresses diasapproval (sic) of spectacula, that is more due to his general belief that mixing with the crowd is dangerous, than to an idea that spectacula were dangerous in themselves.’20 It is the spectators and their reactions, not the games, that are criticized by Seneca. These conclusions, which form the nub of his argument that Seneca is in favour of the games,21 are echoed from a general standpoint

20 Wistrand (1990) 42 and p. 37. Auguet writes: ‘This Stoic of the court hated the rabble; how then could he have approved of what it admired? According to him, its plaudits were the infallible sign of error, and contact with it was a guarantee of defilement.’ (1972 repr.2003) 193. The moral danger of the crowd, its fickleness, lack of honour and the need to be discerning and rational in any dealings with it, is a frequent theme in Seneca’s writings e.g. epp.29.10-2; 32.2; 81.13; 94.53-4; De Vita Beata, 1.4-5; 2.2; De Otio, 1.1; De Clementia, 1.1.

21 He writes: ‘The crowds watching the fights, the executions, or the hunts in the arena is (sic) far more dangerous than the violence per se: the real danger consists in exposing oneself to the influence of the spectators. If we asked Seneca today, he would certainly think it much more harmful for our morals to
by Wiedemann: ‘Of the criticisms in ancient literary sources levelled specifically at gladiatorial games, that which occurs most frequently is that they mobilised the emotions of the onlookers in such a way as to cloud their reason; they made them less rational, less properly human. What objections there were to gladiatorial spectacles on the part of Greek (or Roman) philosophers can hardly...be classified as ‘humanitarian’...rather, they expressed the elitist prejudice against the emotions thought to govern less rational members of society, and applied to many other kinds of shows apart from munera.’22 This is what might be described as the ‘mob instinct’,23 in which rationality is lost to the circumstances and excitement of the moment.24

visit any mass meeting, even sing along gatherings, than to be at home alone watching the very goriest and most sadistic horror-movies on TV.’ (1990) 42.

22 Wiedemann (1992) 142-44. Similarly: ‘The crowd...was the leading actor in these bloody dramas,’ Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 67; ‘for Seneca, the real victims are the spectators’ Cagniart (2000) 612; ‘Seneca’s objection to spectacles seems to be that the audiences are composed mainly of people who are less rational than he and Lucilius, and therefore more inclined to act on emotional impulses and consequently to exhibit bestial behaviour,’ Shelton (2000) 100; ‘Seneca’s primary concern when discussing the bloody spectacles is their effect on audiences, rather than compassion for the victims,’ Varner (2000) 126. With regard to any reservations about the games shown by Cicero and Pliny, Auguet comments in a similar tone (possibly not even treating their comments seriously), that these have ‘rather the look of philosophical commonplace. Reading the Stoics closely, one notes their aversion for the imbecile lack of thought and the foolish agitation encouraged by the times. It is besides a literary commonplace, since these reflections always appear among the purple passages in “the letter”, a quite distinct literary form...they are little more than an epistolary affectation, comments made in confidence by one aristocrat to another,’ (1972 repr.2003) 194 cf. ‘Criticism of public spectacles along these lines was a standard element of Stoicism, and is found in Plutarch, Aulus Gellius, and Philostratus.’ Wiedemann (1992) 143.

23 E.g. A natura discedimus, populo nos damus nullius rei hono auctori et in hac re sicut in his omnibus inconstantissimo, ep.99.17; ‘We abandon nature and surrender to the mob – who are never good advisers in anything, and in this respect as in all others are most inconsistent.’ This was an emphasis of later Christian writers e.g. Tertullian: ‘God has enjoined us to deal calmly, gently,
Amongst the different strands of Wistrand’s argument, the matter of Seneca’s use of gladiatorial metaphors, similes or *exempla* almost seems in itself a separate subject, which can possibly, therefore, be dealt quietly, and peacefully with the Holy Spirit... Well, how shall this be made to accord with the shows? For the show always leads to spiritual agitation, since where there is pleasure, there is keenness of feeling giving pleasure its zest... No one partakes of pleasures such as these without their strong excitements; no one comes under their excitements without their natural lapses.’ (*De Spectaculis*, 15.2-6).

St Augustine also describes the fate of his friend Alypius on his first visit to the gladiatorial games: ‘When he saw the blood, it was as though he had drunk a deep draught of savage passion. Instead of turning away, he fixed his eyes upon the scene and drank in all its frenzy, unaware of what he was doing. He revelled in the wickedness of the fighting and was drunk with the fascination of bloodshed. He was no longer the man who had come to the arena, but simply one of the crowd which he had joined,’ (*Confessions*, 6.8).

Both Shelton and Varner use the behaviour of the spectators described in *ep.7* or in the amphitheatre in general, to discuss the role of spectators in Seneca’s tragedies (Shelton) and in visual art (Varner) i.e. the Roman wall paintings of the fourth style, including those in Nero’s *Domus Aurea*, prevalent in Seneca’s time. Seneca, who includes viewers in his tragedies (Varner, p.130), was apparently concerned with the issue of spectatorship and the process of viewing: ‘Seneca...was profoundly interested in the effects of the bloody spectacles on Roman viewers and it is important to consider them as possible influences and sources as he conceived his very visually oriented and descriptive tragedies.’ Varner (2000) 125. A.J. Boyle (1997) 116ff notes an emphasis on viewing in Seneca’s *Thyestes*, explaining how: ‘By describing violent death verbally and representing it and the reaction to it theatrically Seneca is able to control the perception and evaluation of death in a way that the arena could not do. *Every spectator* at the games saw different things. Seneca controls what they see and how they see it in the theatre, and furnishes them with a conceptual framework with which to judge it.’ (pp.135-6). Shelton comments similarly on *Troades*: ‘Seneca uses the necessity of killing as an opportunity to explore the topics of dying, and of watching dying...lessons apparently lost on the noon-hour spectators of *Epistle 7*.’ (2000) 110. The arguments of Varner and Shelton emphasise Wistrand’s assertion that Seneca approved the games, but not the audience. Their perceptions, which describe creative intent and literary effect, are not, however, an account of how the gladiatorial games actually affected or concerned Seneca. Their arguments should not, therefore, be mistaken for real evidence in support of Seneca’s approval of the games. See also fn. 82 below.
with easily as a first step into this discussion. To interpret these stylistic devices as a positive response to the games, or as evidence of Seneca’s endorsement of them, is to confuse Seneca the writer, a product of the Roman educational system and its training in rhetoric,\textsuperscript{25} with Seneca the man, someone with his own mind-set and individual value system. For Seneca, style was a means to an end,\textsuperscript{26} because a philosopher was also a teacher (\textit{si docent, philosophi sunt}, \textit{ep}.88.4 cf. \textit{epp}.11.8ff; 108.4), and, in particular, a teacher of difficult, not easily achievable subjects or attributes, such as virtue, justice, prudence, self-restraint and integrity (\textit{ep}.120.11). Style was a tool in the accomplishment of this and it was necessary that it underscore the importance of its subject matter, strengthen meaning and reveal and value truth. Hence Seneca praises Lucilius: \textit{habes verba in potestate, non effert te oratio nec longius quam destinasti irahit...pressa sunt omnia et rei aptata; loqueris quantum vis et plus significas quam loqueris. Hoc maioris rei indicium est: apparent animum quoque nihil habere supervacui, nihil tumidi}, (\textit{ep}.59.4-5).\textsuperscript{27} A study of Seneca’s metaphors shows the commonplace nature of his

\textsuperscript{25} ‘Seneca was a philosopher with training in oratory, a Stoic who employed his highly developed rhetorical talents to instruct, to persuade or simply to charm his reader into accepting the truths of Stoicism.’ Cooper and Procopé (1995) xxvi-vii. MacL. Currie underscores the same point: ‘The younger Seneca could not escape the effects of his education. Further, brought up to think and speak in the fashionable way, he found he had a particular aptitude for it.’ (1966) 77.

\textsuperscript{26} Chief studies of Seneca’s style include Summers (1910 repr.1965) xlii-xcv; MacL. Currie (1966); Coleman (1974); Wilson (1988), Dominik (1997a) 50-68 and Williams (2003) 25-32. Repeatedly, any assessment of Seneca’s style falls on words such as ‘pointed’, ‘laconic’, ‘epigrammatic’ or ‘emphatic’, qualities condemned by Quintilian (\textit{Institutio Oratoria}, 10.1.25ff), an archaist who looked back to the large formal structures and periodic style of Cicero.

\textsuperscript{27} ‘You have your words under control. You are not carried away by your language, or borne beyond the limits which you have determined upon...all your words are compact, and suited to the subject. You say all that you wish, and you mean still more than you say. This is a proof of the importance of your subject matter, showing that your mind, as well as your words, contain nothing superfluous or bombastic.’

98
comparisons which consistently draw on ordinary life.28 As a common aspect of Roman life, can there really then be any surprise in Seneca’s use of gladiatorial imagery to underscore his philosophical arguments?29 What is more to the point is how Seneca used these stylistic aids, 30 and a

28 Smith writes how the metaphorical nature of Seneca’s language is wideranging, its subject matter making use of ‘practically the entire field of the private and public life of the ordinary Roman.’ (1910) 181.

29 Both Auguet and Wiedemann emphasise the pervasiveness of the gladiatorial games. They ‘became one of the most familiar aspects of everyday life...they pervaded life. They imposed their rhythm on existence and provided nourishment for the passions.’ Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 15; ‘These spectacles were not just a public occasion: they also played a major role in the way people arranged their private experience.’ Wiedemann (1992) 23. Knowledge of technical gladiatorial vocabulary was also prevalent amongst the population, even as the games were a frequent (‘stock’) subject of conversation (see Epictetus, Discourses, 3.15.6; Tacitus, Dialogus de Oratoribus, 29.3).

30 Seneca’s estimation of metaphor as a proper and effective tool for a writer can be determined with some degree of certainty from his own comments. Applauding Lucilius’ use of metaphor, he carries on to give general approbation to the use of metaphors and similes: Invenio tamen translationes verborum ut non temerarias ita quae periculum sui fecerint; invenio imagines, quibus si quis nos uti vetat et poetis illas solis indicat esse concessas, neminem mihi videtur ex antiquis legisse. apud quos nondum captabantur plausibilis oratio: illi, qui simpliciter et demonstrandae rei causa eloquebantur, parabolis refert oratio: quas existimo necessarias, non ex eadem causa qua poetis, sed ut inbecillitatis nostrae adminicula sint, ut et dicentem et auditem in rem praesentem adducant, ep.59.6; ‘I do, however, find some metaphors, not, indeed, daring ones, but the kind which have stood the test of use. I find similes also; of course, if anyone forbids us to use them, maintaining that poets alone have that privilege, he has not, apparently, read any of our ancient prose writers, who had not yet learned to affect a style that should win applause. For those writers, whose eloquence was simple and directed only towards proving their case, are full of comparisons; and I think that these are necessary, not for the same reason which makes them necessary for the poets, but in order that they serve as props to our feebleness, to bring both speaker and listener face to face with the subject under discussion.’ Both metaphor and simile should be an expressive aid for the
reference to any example of a gladiatorial metaphor shows how effectively they did work for him in demonstrating the qualities of the Stoic sapiens.

The unflinching self-determination and integrity of the sapiens is graphically represented in gladiatorial terms early on in the Epistulae Morales: *Ab illis qui manus harenæ locant et edunt ac bibunt quae per sanguinem reddant cavetur ut ista vel inviti patiantur: a te ut volens libensque patiars. Illis licet arma summittare, misericordiam populi temptare: tu neque summittes nec vitam rogabis; recto tibi invicto mortiendum est,* (ep.37.2; ‘From the men who hire out their strength for the arena, who eat and drink what they must pay for with their blood, security is taken that they will endure such trials even though they be unwilling: from you, that you will endure them willingly and with alacrity. The gladiator may lower his weapon and test the pity of the people; but you will neither lower your weapon nor beg for life. You must die erect and unyielding.’).31 Later in ep.71, Seneca subtly echoes the gladiatorial oath (cf. ‘uri, vinciri ferroque necari’, ep.37.1) to express the same willingness and impulse towards virtue (*Quid miraris si uri, vulnerari, occidi, alligari iuvat, aliquando etiam libet?* ep.71.23; ‘Why do you marvel if it helps a man, and on occasion even pleases him, to be burned, wounded, slain, or bound in prison?’ cf. ep.88.29). Similarly, in De Providentia (4.4), Seneca quotes a gladiator from the time of Tiberius Caesar, to express the courage of the kind of man who is unafraid to endure against adversity (cf. De Const. Sap. 16.2-3). Just like the gladiator, the philosopher must formulate his plans and always be in a state of readiness (ep.22.1), because Fortune is often the adversary against whom he needs to set himself *(Exerceamur ad palum...ne inparatos fortuna deprehendat, ep.18.8; ‘Let us practice our strokes on the “dummy”...so that Fortune may not catch us off our guard.’).*32 Once the bell for battle has sounded, and especially when death is close or inevitable (ep.30.8), there should therefore be no failing

---

philosopher, the vividness and perspective of their comparisons giving a subject more clarity and depth.

31 See also epp.13.2; 30.8; 117.7; De Prov. 2.3-4, 6.

32 See epp.13.2; 80.3; 117.25; De Tranq. An. 11.4ff; De Prov. 3.4.
or hesitation in one’s duty because Philosophy is metaphorically the armour of one’s defence (ep. 117.25). Thus, just as the gladiator uses his combative skill as his protection and does not allow anger (the worst of emotions, De Ira, 1.1.1), to lose him his chances (De Ira, 1.11.2 cf. Cicero, Tusculan Disputations, 4.21.48), all men likewise must learn to regulate their anger and keep it under control (cf. De Ira, 2.14.3). If not, life can turn out to be no better than an existence in gladiatorial barracks (Non alia quam in ludo gladiatorio uita est cum isdem uientium pugnantiumque. Ferarum iste comuentus est, nisi quod illae inter se placidae sunt morsuque similium abstinent, hi mutua laceratione satiantur, De Ira, 2.8.2-3; ‘They live as though they were in a gladiatorial school – those with whom they eat, they likewise fight. It is a community of wild beasts, only that beasts are gentle toward each other and refrain from tearing their own kind, while men glut themselves with rending one another.’).³³

In particular, however, our ability to accept death can be likened to the situation of the gladiator who must face death every time he goes into the arena (Numquid felicior et indicas eum qui summo die muneris quam eum qui medio occiditur? numquid aliquem tam stulte cupidum esse vitae putas ut iugulari in spoliario quam in harena malit? Non maiore spatio alter alterum praecedimus, ep. 93.12; ‘Do you regard as more fortunate the fighter who is slain on the last day of the games than one who goes to his death in the middle of the festivities? Do you believe that anyone is so foolishly covetous of life that he would rather have his throat cut in the dressing-room than in the amphitheatre? It is by no longer an interval than this that we precede one another.’)³⁴

---

³³ Translation of De Ira is from J.W. Basore’s three volume edition of Seneca’s Moral Essays in The Loeb Classical Library, vol.1. Basore’s translation of all the works included in this edition will be used in the following discussion and will be cited by volume. Cf. Non in cursu tantum circique certamine, sed in his spatiis vitae interius flectendum est, De Tranq. An. 9.3; ‘Not only in the race and the contests of the Circus, but also in the arena of life we must keep to the inner circle.’ (Translation by Basore, vol.2).

³⁴ The ability to accept death and overcome any fears concerning its approach and inevitability was, of course, a major philosophical preoccupation of
Death finally comes to us all and, in the same way that the death of one person follows on that of someone else, the survivor in the ring will eventually in his turn be slain too (cf. Interfectores interfecturis iubent obici et victorem in aliam detinent caedem; exitus pugnantium mors est. ep.7.3). Seneca’s philosophical lessons on death, its inevitability and the virtue of its fearless acceptance (e.g. epp.76.33; 85.29) are given the perspective of gladiatorial combat, appropriately a sport of death (cf. De Ben. 2.34.3). At the same time, suicide was a part of Stoic teaching and the lesson that to die by one’s own hand might be the only honorable alternative is pinpointed in ep.70 by three exempla from the arena (70.20-6). Virtue can be found in a gladiatorial training school

Seneca’s (e.g. De Brevitate Vitae). He introduces the subject early in the Epistulae Morales in ep.4 and his attention on it throughout the whole work never wavers. Shelton regards a fascination with death more generally as a Roman characteristic, (2000) 87; 118, fn.60.

Wiedemann regards the sport itself philosophically: ‘Gladiators faced death every time they entered the arena, but they were not certain that they were going to die on any particular occasion... Instead of seeing a gladiatorial combat as a public display of killing, it might be useful to see it as a demonstration of the power to overcome death.’ (1992) 35.

The Stoic Elders, Zeno and Cleanthes, had killed themselves but Cato the Younger (e.g. ep.14) was the traditional example of the man who took his life justifiably and honourably as a pledge to his own inner integrity. See Griffin (1976) 367-88 for Seneca’s views on suicide; in particular, pp.372-82. From Seneca’s writings, see for example, epp.12.10; 58.32; 70.6; 98.16; 120.14; De Ira, 3.15.4 cf. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 5.29; 8.47; 10.22, 32.

The use of exempla, examples of famous people from the past or present to illustrate an idea or ethical decision, was a stock feature of Roman modes of writing and declamation (e.g. Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, 12.2.29-31). Theoretically, the exemplum had a pedagogical function with which Seneca’s usage accords (An fortitudinem, iustitiam, fidem, continentiam, frugalitatem, contemptum doloris ac mortis melius alii docebunt quam Fabricii, Curii, Reguli, Decii, Mucii alique innumerabiles ? Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, 12.2.30; ‘Who will teach courage, justice, loyalty, self-control, simplicity, and contempt of grief and pain better than men like Fabricus, Curius, Regulus, Decius, Mucius and countless others?’) Text and translation are from H.E.Butler’s four volume
or in the amphitheatre as much as it can anywhere else (cf. Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, 12.5.13). He is great who has not only given himself the order to die but has also found the means.

Obviously, some instances of gladiatorial allusion have no deeper significance than that the activities of the arena were a regular aspect of Roman life and any mention of them would have a familiarity which would at once add focus to whatever Seneca was saying. In the *Naturales Quaestiones* (7.32.1) for instance, the games are a distraction that can take one from the more valuable occupation of philosophical study (cf. ep.80.1). In *Hercules Oetaeus* (1472), the playwright uses the gladiatorial term *'habet'*, which was shouted when one of the gladiators had received the death stroke, to announce the death of Hercules. Seneca uses it similarly in *Agamemnon* (901).

38 For other commonplace references, see for example *De Ben.* 5.3.3; 6.12.2; epp.29.6; 41.6; 80.2; 87.9; 99.13 (cf. Elder Seneca, *Controversiae*, 10.4.18); 117.30; *De Brev.Vit.* 16.3; *De Tranq. An.* 2.13; *Nat. Quaest.* 2.9.2; 4.praef.8; *Ad Helv.* 17.1; *Apocolocyntosis*. 9.3. Similar references to the games as a typical feature of daily life occur in other writers such as Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations*, 4.21.48) and Horace (*Satires*, 2.3.84ff; 2.6.44; 2.7.58, 96-100; *Epistles*, 1.18.19). Epictetus notes in the *Enchiridion* that *'gladiators are one of the common subjects of conversation.'* (33.2 cf. Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.29.37).

39 The various cries of *Habet, hoc habet!* ('He's had it!'), *Mitte!* ('Let him go!') or *Iugula!* ('Kill him!') rose from the audience whenever one of the combatants was wounded or forced down to the ground. The gladiator who was able to plead for mercy, either from his opponent or the judge, would lay down his shield and raise his index finger, usually of the left hand. By the gesture of a downwards turn of the thumb (*pollice verso*), the crowd could signal its disapproval and a refusal of mercy. See Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 50. The thumbs up gesture was one in favour of reprieve. Wiedemann (1992) 93-95 questions how universal these terms and gestures really were.
One statement that appears to fall into this category of commonplace reference is quoted by Wistrand as ‘positive proof’ that Seneca found the games ‘a form of pleasant relaxation’ i.e. ‘particularly relaxing and pleasant’ (1990) 41. This statement, *Ludis interim aut gladiatoribus animum occupamus* (*Sometimes we occupy the mind with public games or the bouts of gladiators*), occurs in the *Consolatio ad Helviam Matrem* (17.1). It is difficult, however, to regard this brief sentence as such a conclusive statement of approval. Seneca’s thesis in the *Consolatio* is against the futility and all-consuming power of the emotion of grief (*Scio rem non esse in nostra potestate nec illum adefectum seruire, minime vero eum qui ex dolore nascitur; ferox enim et adversus omne remedium contumax est*, *Ad Helv.* 17.1; ‘I know well that this is a matter that is not in our own power, and that no emotion is submissive, least of all that which is born from sorrow; for it is wild and stubbornly resists every remedy.’). He then cites gladiatorial bouts as a possible diversion to occupy and distract the grieving mind. The games, in fact, are merely an example of the ineffectiveness of material or physical preoccupations in comparison with *ratio*, which is the only real remedy for grief or emotion (*at quisquis rationi cessit, in perpetuum componitur*, *Ad Helv.* 17.2; ‘But the grief that has submitted to reason is allayed for ever.’). There is not even any specific indication that Seneca’s reference to the games here signifies pleasure. The arena is a distraction from sorrow which is beguiling (*delusus*), but which can also be either pleasurable or a more serious preoccupation (*Ideo melius est uincere illum quam fallere; nam qui delusus et voluptatibus aut occupationibus abductus est, resurgit et ipsa quiete impetum ad saeviendum conligit*, *Ad Helv.* 17.2; ‘Therefore it is better to subdue our sorrow than to cheat it; for when it has withdrawn and has been beguiled by pleasures or engrossments, it rises up again, and from its very rest gathers new strength for its fury.’). Seneca’s reference to the games is ambivalent and it neither praises nor justifies them.41

---

40 All translations here of *Ad Helv.* are by Basore, vol.2.

41 Like Seneca, Tacitus seems to regard the games as a distraction which interrupts useful activity: *histrionalis favor et gladiatorum equorumque studia: quibus occupatus et obsessus animus quantum loci bonis artibus relinquit?*
Mera Homicidia

Even if *Ad Helv.* 17.1 is read as a reference to pleasurable enjoyment, it certainly in no way stands as a definitive statement that Seneca enjoyed the games. Nor is it feasible that Wistrand should cite the phrase *lusus expectans et sales et aliquid laxamenti* from *ep.* 7.3 to support his conclusions about *Ad Helv.* 17.2 and, as further evidence that Seneca enjoyed the games. Seneca did not deliberately go to the

(Dialogus de Oratoribus, 29.3; ‘enthusiasm for the stage and passion for gladiators and horse racing: how little room does a mind busied and obsessed with these things leave for good pursuits?’ Translation by Benario (1967 rev.ed.1991) 118 cf. *Hodierno die non tantum meo beneficio mihi vaco sed spectaculi, quod omnes molestos ad sphaeromachian avocavit. Nemo inrumpet, nemo cogitationem meam impediet, quae hac ipsa fiducia procedit audacius, ep. 80.1; ‘To-day I have some free time, thanks not so much to myself as to the games, which have attracted all the bores to the boxing-match. No one will interrupt me or disturb the train of my thoughts, which go ahead more boldly as the result of my very confidence.’ See also *Nat. Quaest.* 7.32.1; Pliny, *Epistles,* 9.6.4). Cagniart incongruously writes of *Nat. Quaest.* 7.32.1 that ‘despite his apparent disappointment in the subordination of philosophy to the games, Seneca does not really blame the Romans for their passion.’ (2000) 609-10.

42 Compare the explicitness of Cicero’s statement about the pleasure the games can bring (*Itaque lex haec quae ad ludos pertinet est omnium gratissima, quod honestissimo ordini cum splendore fructus quoque iucunditatis est restitutus. Quare delectant homines, mihi crede, ludi, etiam illos qui dissimulant, non solum eos qui fatentur, Pro Murena, 19.40; ‘and so that law of his which concerns public games is most popular of all, because it restores to a most respected order distinction and the enjoyment of pleasure. Therefore, believe me, men do find pleasure in games, not only those who admit it, but those as well who pretend they do not.’). Text and translation are from Lord’s volume of Cicero’s works in The Loeb Classical Library. See also *Pro Murena,* 36.77 cf. *Epistulae ad Familiares,* 7.1.3ff; 12.18.2. In contrast, Marcus Aurelius, both emperor and Stoic, claims to gain little pleasure from the games, regarding them as monotonous and the similarity of the spectacle ‘nauseating’, (*Meditations,* 6.46). The Younger Pliny expresses similar comments about the races (*Epistles,* 9.6.1-4). Marcus Aurelius’ correspondence with Fronto reveals how the former would sometimes read books at the games. See Rutherford (1989 repr.1998) 136 cf. Suetonius, *Augustus,* 45.2-3, a reference also to Julius Caesar.

105
midday spectacle in search of entertainment. It was a chance decision
(Casu in meridianum spectaculum incidi), the fact that it was lunchtime,
when the venationes of the morning were complete and before the main
gladiatorial bouts of the afternoon had begun, giving Seneca the
expectation of something that would be enjoyable, stimulating and
undemanding and, during which, he would not be subject to any of the
usual bloodshed or horror. Significantly, he is specific on this point. He
is looking for entertainment which offers some respite from the sight of
human slaughter (i.e. quo hominum oculi ab humano cruore
acquiescant).

When Seneca drops in at the arena, it appears that it is some kind
of light intellectual humor and respite from everyday pressures that he is
after, rather than pleasure for its own sake (Danda est animis remissio:
meiores acrioresque requieti surgent...uires recipient paulum resoluti et
remissi, De Tranq. An.17.5; ‘The mind must be given relaxation; it will
arise better and keener after resting...if it is released and relaxed a little
while, it will recover its powers’).44 In fact, it is difficult to justify any
other expectation by Seneca, especially in a context where pleasure is
specifically equated with vitia (tunc enim per voluptatem vitia
subrepunt, ep.7.2; ‘for then it is that vice steals subtly upon one through
the avenue of pleasure’). Pleasure, in its ordinary sense, is not something
Seneca would have been actively seeking and notably he does not use
the word ‘pleasure’ when he expresses his hopes regarding the
entertainment at the arena.45 Unlike other people at the games, Seneca’s

43 Wistrand (1990) 41, fn.32. Cagniart, presumably following Wistrand’s lead,
reads Ad. Helv 17.1 in the same way (2000) 609, fn.20. He also cites ep.7.3 (as
well as De Tranq. An. 17.5-7) in support.

44 Basore’s translation, vol.2.

45 Pleasure was considered by the Stoics as a vice, although the word (with
qualification and explanation) could be used to signify a pleased or joyful state
of mind (Magnam ex epistula tua percepi voluptatem; permitte enim mihi uti
verbis publicis nec illa ad significationem Stoicam revoca. Vitium esse
voluptatem credimus. Sit sane; ponere tamen illam solemus ad demonstrandum
animi hilarem adfectionem. Scio, inquam, et voluptatem, si ad nostrum album
verba derigimus, rem infamem esse et gaudium nisi sapienti non contingere; est
presence there had nothing to do with pleasure, just as his reason for staying as long as he did was different. And, with our focus still upon Seneca the skilful writer, who was always using stylistic device to underscore his argument, it also needs to be considered how the use of the phrase *lusus expectans etc.* creates in context an antithetical, virtually ironic, image which highlights the full horror of the events Seneca then describes. If Seneca really did regard the games as ‘particularly relaxing and pleasant’ (Wistrand), it might perhaps be surmised that (having endured with such distress the *meridianum spectaculum*) he would then, almost out of necessity, stay for the afternoon bouts to regain some equilibrium and calm. Instead, with no suggestion otherwise, we take it for granted that he left immediately.

To return to the main point about Seneca’s use of gladiatorial metaphors, similes or *exempla*, Seneca never hesitates to use these, if they serve to enhance his argument and underscore its significance. In fact, the occurrence of gladiatorial imagery was not even unusual. Already in Cicero’s writings, his description of the gladiator in the *Tusculan Disputations* is an explicit representation of fortitude (2.17.41). Horace’s comparison of himself at the beginning of his *Epistles* to an old gladiator who has been discharged is another well-known example of this metaphor (*Epistles*, 1.1.3-6).46 ‘Already in the

**enim animi elatio suis bonis verisque fidentis, ep.59.1-2; ‘I received great pleasure from your letter; kindly allow me to use these words in their everyday meaning, without insisting upon their Stoic import. For we Stoics hold that pleasure is a vice. Very likely it is a vice; but we are accustomed to use the word when we wish to indicate a happy state of mind. I am aware that if we test words by our formula, even pleasure is a thing of ill repute and joy can be attained only by the wise. For “joy” is an elation of spirit, - of a spirit which trusts in the goodness and truth of its own possessions.’ cf. *ep*.4.1; *De Ben.*7.2.3-4). Pleasure was thought to enslave man, to weaken him and destroy his soul (e.g. *epp*.39.5-6; 51.5-6; 58.29; 92.10; 95.23; 110.10; 114.23-5; *De Vita Beata*, 4.4; 5.4; 14.1-3). Significantly, the pleasure of the wise man is calm and moderate (e.g. *ep*.15.9; *De Tranq. An.*17.2; *De Vita Beata*, 13.2; *De Ben.* 7.2.4). In contrast to *ep*.7.3, Seneca does use *voluptas* as concomitant to *lusus iocusque* (‘sport and amusement’) in *De Tranq. An.* 17.6, although he warns that any over-indulgence has serious consequences for the mind’s gravity and power.
middle years of the Republic', writes Barton, 'the gladiator had begun to assume a metaphorical role outside of the arena. Terence (2nd century B.C.E.) is the first to infuse the gladiator with a metaphorical weight. In the *Phormio* Terence uses the expression "with the spirit of the gladiator" ("gladiatorio animo") as the equivalent of "without hope or fear"... Six centuries later the metaphor of the *gladiatorius animus* will have approximately the same significance.' (1993) 17.47 There is nothing out of the ordinary in Seneca’s use of this imagery. In the light of this, it is incongruous to attribute its occurrence to a statement of personal opinion.48

This stylistic argument can only, of course, be incidental to the main thrust of the persuasions of Wistrand and others who try to deny Seneca’s opposition to the gladiatorial games. For them his interest in *ep. 7.3-5* is driven neither by a dislike of the event (i.e. the *munera* proper as opposed to lunchtime events) nor a humanitarian purpose (concern for the welfare and treatment of the combatants), but by the philosophical issues represented by the dangers of the crowd and its abandonment of *ratio* and *virtus*.49 In taking up these points, one factor

46 Barton comments: ‘By the time Horace composed his *Epistles*, the metaphor of the gladiator could be used to express both a fierce ambition *and* a willingness to be completely dependent upon audience and master (both of whom Horace declares he has lost [*Epistulae 1.1, esp.3-6*]).’ (1993) 17, fn.19.

47 In an earlier footnote, Barton specifies how ‘the gladiator, to a degree unmatched by the actor or the charioteer, served as a powerful metaphorical figure in the surviving texts of the late Republican period and the first centuries of the Empire,’ (1993) 12, fn.6 cf. Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 51.

48 Cagniart’s argument degenerates into a discussion of Seneca’s use of gladiatorial metaphors, which then serve as his main evidence that Seneca approved of the games: ‘Certainly the tragic actors in the amphitheater served as catharsis for Seneca: they relieved his anxieties of suffering and dying through sympathetic identification with their ordeals and their scorn for adversity and death, *cum artibus.*’ (2000) 618. See also p. 613.

49 See fns.20-23 above. Wiedemann relegates ‘ancient criticism of gladiatorial games’ to ‘expression by specific groups or individuals in particular contexts
necessarily emerges at once to give focus to any ideas about Seneca’s social interest. This is the untypical and individual humanitarian response Seneca had to other similar issues during his lifetime. The matter of *clementia* is one such subject. Seneca was the author of *De Clementia* and, as the title indicates, it was a work devoted to nurturing and training the qualities of mercy and compassion in the young emperor Nero (e.g. *De Clem.* 1.1.3-4; 1.13.2; 1.25.2-3; 1.26.3), a man with ultimate power over people, society and its working (*Ego vitae necisque gentibus arbiter; qualem quisque sortem statumque habeat, in mea manu positum est, De Clem.* 1.1.2; ‘I am the arbiter of life and death for the nations; it rests in my power what each man’s lot and state shall be’). Likewise, ‘one of Seneca’s most common themes’, Griffin (1976) 177 was the matter of slavery and the Romans’ inhumane treatment of slaves (*Servi sunt.* *Non homines...Alia interim crudelia, inhumana praetereo, quod ne tamquam hominibus quidem sed tamquam iumentis abutimur...in quos superbissimi, crudelissimi, con tumeliosissimi sumus, ep.47.1,5,11; “They are slaves,” people declare. Nay, rather they are men...I shall pass over other cruel and inhuman conduct towards them; for we maltreat them, not as if they were men, but as if they were beasts of burden... [and] towards whom we Romans are excessively haughty, cruel and insulting.’ cf. ep.31,11; *De Ira*, 3.5.4; *De Clem.* 1.18.1-2; *De Ben.* 3.18.2-4; 20.1-2; 28.1-3). Slavery was an issue which constituted the very thread and fabric of Roman society but, as Seneca recognised, it was often without human regard and was sometimes simply a selfish and abusive fulfilment of one man’s power over another.51

which do not permit any conclusions to be drawn about widespread objections to the inhumanity of the games, even in late antiquity when they ceased to play a central role in Roman culture.’ (1992) 129. See also. pp.140-44 and Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 194.

50 Translation by Basore, vol.1.

51 See Griffin (1976) 256-85. She writes that Seneca treats the issue at length: ‘For Seneca does not merely condemn cruelty. He asks that slaves be regarded as individuals with different moral capacities, as potential friends whose relations with the master are based on love or respect rather than fear, generosity on one side being matched by loyalty on the other.’ (p.256).
Being prepared to take a stand on these issues, there was no reason why Seneca should not demonstrate a similar compassionate interest in other matters which he found objectionable. It is important therefore that a humanitarian perspective emphasises his focus upon the games even before his description of them has begun. Initially, he describes the moral danger of the games (*Nihil vero tam damnosum bonis moribus quam in aliquo spectaculo desidere, ep. 7.2;* 'But nothing is so damaging to good character as the habit of lounging at the games'). Seneca is concerned that the games are a place of spiritual harm and vulnerability and the peril they represent is that which comes through pleasure (*tunc enim per voluptatem facilius vitia subrepunt*). This is Seneca's moral argument against the games (cf. fn.45 above) and he states it before he goes on to criticise the games themselves. Thus, when he specifies some of the vitia pleasure can influence and intensify (*avarior, ambitiosior, luxuriosior, immo vero redeo crudelior et inhumanior, quia inter homines fui, ep. 7.3*), Seneca is already shifting his attention and subtly anticipating the nature of the event that is to follow. Hence, although a man might return home more greedy, more ambitious, more extravagant, it is the qualities of cruelty and inhumanity that sound more loudly than any others in this list.

Using stylistic means, Seneca ensures a deliberate emphasis in the reading of the phrase *crudelior et inhumanior*. As each vitium (*avarior, ambitiosior, luxuriosior*) advances the other, the list culminates with the separate distinction (*immo vero*) of *crudelior* and *inhumanior*. Their

52 Griffin writes: 'The most striking ways in which Seneca applies such ideas are his advocacy of good treatment for slaves...his abhorrence of gladiatorial shows (Ep.90.45; 95.33) and of the slaughter of criminals in the arena (Ep.7.3ff). We have already met these ideas...in De Clementia,' (1976) 178.

53 Cf. *Nec ad hoc tanta hominum cupiditas tenderet, nisi naturalem quondam voluptatem haberet lusus iocusque; quorum frequens usus omne animis pondus omnemque uim eripiet, De Tranq. An. 17.6;* 'Nor would the desire of men tend so much in this direction [a certain dullness and languor] unless sport and amusement brought a sort of pleasure that was natural, but the frequent use of these will steal all weight and all force from the mind.' Translation by Basore, vol.2.
linkage by \textit{et} further underscores their distinction, an emphasis which highlights what it is about the games that makes them so bad (Quae nos dementia exagitat et in mutuum componit exitium? Nat. Quaest. 5.18.6; 'What madness drives us and makes us ready to destroy one another?').\textsuperscript{54} The paradox of \textit{inhumanior} as a correlation of human association (quia inter homines fui) is also the beginning of a repetitive play throughout the following narration on the word \textit{homo}.\textsuperscript{55} Although his description of the lunchtime combats has not yet begun, Seneca carefully highlights our sense of the inhumanity, the cold-blooded brutality and pitilessness of the events he witnessed and, whose purpose, rather than serving the community, has a larger detrimental effect in terms of individual morality.

Seneca’s verbal clues (\textit{homo, crudelior, inhumanior}) are clear indicators that his objection to the games has a humanitarian basis. He recognises and deals quickly and specifically with the moral danger of the games, but even as he does so, he is introducing his own view of the games and what they represent to him (i.e. crudelior et inhumanior). Without stopping to elaborate the moral issues further, Seneca then moves on directly to describe the horror of the actual fighting and to reveal the social iniquity of the games. The concentration that has been

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotesubtext{54} Text and translation of the \textit{Naturales Quaestiones} are from the two volume edition in the Loeb Classical Library series by Corcoran. For the above passage, see vol.2. cf. quae causa hominem adversus hominem in facinus coegit?...quae tanta vos pestis, cum una stirps idemque sanguis sitis, quaeve furiae in mutuum sanguinem egere? Seneca the Elder, \textit{Controversiae}, 2.1.10; ‘What was it that compelled man to commit crime against man?... What is this hideous disease, this fury that drove you to shed each other’s blood – though you are of one stock, one blood?’). Text and translation are from the two volume edition of the Elder Seneca’s rhetorical works in the Loeb Classical Library by Winterbottom, vol.1.

\footnotesubtext{55} The word constantly recurs in various forms i.e. \textit{hominis, hominum, humano, homicidia, homines, hominem, homines}. Cf. Marcus Aurelius’ proclamation that gladiators were not worthy to be included amongst those who were to pay taxes because ‘their money is contaminated by the stain of human blood;’ \textit{[pecunia] cruroris humani aspergine contaminata}. Quoted by Wiedemann (1992) 30.
put on the reaction of the audience ignores how the real focus of Seneca’s criticism in ep. 7 falls on the description of the fighting and its various phases. Throughout the whole episode, Seneca’s use of stylistic device (polyptoton, anaphora, antithesis, rhetorical questions, ellipsis, alliteration, dialogue or quotation) is unremitting, as he vivifies the fighting with an emphasis which is condemnatory and an immediacy which captures its reality. His technique, which is narrative, is unprecedented in the letters so far, thus distinguishing this episode at once in the context of Book 1 of the Epistulae Morales.

The very procedure and methods of combat are held in contempt as Seneca allows stress to fall more than once on the defencelessness of the men forced to endure this ordeal (nihil habent quo tegantur; non galea, non scuto; mutuos ictus nudis et obviis pectoribus excipiant). Seneca even asserts that many spectators actually preferred this program of fighting to the ordinary gladiatorial matches (ordinariis paribus) or to the postulaticiis (skilled gladiators who served the audience’s demand for encores). Unfortunately, this preference was the very vulnerability of the combatants (ad ictum totis corporibus ex positi nunquam frustra manum mittunt...Quidni praefarerat?). Seneca uses defiant anaphora

56 The manifest ‘cruelty and bloodthirstiness’ of Claudius, Nero’s predecessor, which ‘appeared equally in great and small matters’ (saevum et sanguinarium natura fuisse, magnis minimisque apparuit rebus), is exemplified by Suetonius with an instance of Claudius forcing one of his pages into the arena to fight just as he was, without protection, in his toga (Claudius, 34.1). Suetonius also notes that the meridianum spectaculum was a spectacle which Claudius particularly enjoyed: bestiaris meridianisque adeo delectabantur, ut et prima luce ad spectaculum descenderet et meridie dismisso ad prandium populo persederet, praeterque destinatos etiam levi subitaque de causa quosdam committeret, (Claudius, 34.2; ‘Claudius so greatly enjoyed wild-beast shows and the fencing matches during the luncheon interval that, after he had spent the whole morning in the amphitheatre from daybreak until noon, he would dismiss the audience, keep his seat, and not only watch the regular combats but extemporize others’). Claudius apparently liked to watch the death agony of a fallen gladiator, especially the retiarii or net-fighters who did not wear helmets and died with their faces exposed (Quocumque gladiatorio munere, vel suo vel alieno, etiam forte prolapsos iugulari iubebat, maxime retiarios, ut expirantium facies videret, 34.1; ‘At gladiatorial shows, whether or not they were staged by himself, he

112
of *quo* to introduce rhetorical questions which ask with a bitterness, underscored by verbal ellipsis, what purpose armour would serve anyway (*Quo munimenta? quo artes?*). These men are going to die whatever happens (*omnia ista mortis morae sunt*) and repetition of the initial syllable (*mor*-*) cynically highlights the key words at the centre of this assertion. Any defence only puts off the inevitable, an idea Seneca repeats as a paradox of victory (*Interfectores interfecturis iubent obici et victorem in aliam detinent caedem*). The juxtaposed polyptoton of *interfectores interfecturis* is a stark realisation of the cruel irony that whatever blows either fighter strikes in defence of himself are really blows against himself. Death, Seneca repeats, is the only outcome of this combat (*exitus pugnantium mors est*) and adding to the horror of any of the events described, he almost casually adds the detail, *Haec fiunt dum vacat harena.* Although it is lunchtime, the intermission can not be a

---

57 The death of a gladiator, although a possibility, was not necessarily a certainty. The defeated gladiator was offered a chance of reprieve by the audience and the emperor (see fn.39 above), but also: ‘A highly skilled voluntary gladiator was an expensive and valued item and would only be sacrificed...as an act of conspicuous and splendid generosity.’ Barton (1993) 13, fn.9. Wiedemann is able to provide statistics and evidence of gladiators who had long gladiatorial careers and retired, without dying in the arena (1992) 120-24. Combats in which there was no possibility of reprieve for the loser (i.e. *munera sine missione*) were eventually banned by Augustus (Suetonius, *Augustus*, 45.3). It can also be noted how the power to bestow life or death or restore a man his privileges of citizenship, gave the ordinary Roman population, which was not usually allowed to partake in public decision-making, a unique authority which could also account for the popularity of the games. See Wiedemann (1992) 165ff and Cicero, *Pro Sestio*, 115.

58 Marcus Aurelius uses the same idea in his comparison: ‘For still to be such as you have been up to the present, to be torn and polluted in such a way of life, is to be utterly brutalized, to cling to mere life like half-devoured combatants in the arena, a mass of wounds and dusty blood, yet imploring to be kept alive until the morrow, only to be exposed in that state to the same teeth and claws.’ (*Meditations*, 10.8).
time for rest. There is a momentum to be maintained and the atmosphere must not be lost ("interim iugulentur homines, ne nihil agatur"). These are events that do not have to take place. This is the pointlessness of the games.

The whole passage consists of short asyndetic statements or questions and this lack of conjunction adds an edge of brusqueness appropriate to the attitude of the spectators. Certainly, the audience is indifferent to the fate of these fighters or the combat methods used, except if they are not brutal enough (cf. Depugnant? parum est. Lancinantur? parum est, De Brev. Vit. 13.6; ‘Do they fight to the death? That is not enough! Are they torn to pieces? That is not enough!’). To say that Seneca does not criticise the games but only the spectators is to ignore that it is the games themselves (the violence and energy of live combat, its excitement, its anticipation and uncertainty of outcome, its images of glory and victory, its notions of punishment and retribution), that influence and distort the spectators’ attitudes. People are, as Seneca knows, overwhelmed in this kind of situation by forgetfulness of what is humane and just (Homo, sacra res homini, iam per lusum ac iocum occiditur et quem erudiri ad inferenda accipiandaque vulnera nefas erat, is iam nudus inermisque producitur satisque spectaculi ex homine mors est, ep.95.33; ‘Man, an object of reverence in the eyes of man, is now slaughtered for jest and sport; and those whom it used to be unholy to train for the purpose of inflicting and enduring wounds, are thrust forth exposed and defenceless; and it is a satisfying spectacle to see a man made a corpse.’ See also De Brev. Vit. 13.6-7). In fact, an audience, in their aggressive hunt for the kill, can seem like beasts themselves (Crueditas minime humanum malum est indignumque tam miti animo; ferina ista rabies est sanguine gaudere ac vulneribus et abieicto homine in silvestre animal transire, De Clem. 1.25.1; ‘Cruelty is an evil thing befitting least of all a man, and is unworthy of his spirit that is so kindly; for one to take delight in blood and wounds and, throwing off the man, to change into a creature of the woods, is the madness of a wild beast.’

59 Translation by Basore, vol.2.

60 Translation by Basore, vol.1.
nor implication, Seneca represents the spectators as being no better than the bears and lions to which the men are thrown in the morning (*Mane leonis et ursis homines, meridie spectatoribus suis obiciuntur*, ep. 7.4 cf. *De Clem. 1.13.2*). This is not merely inhumanity, but lack of humanness and, as the verb *obiciuntur* (which serves both clauses) highlights, the spectators' actions are deliberate (*iubent obici* cf. *Interfectores interfecturis iubent obici*). The prisoner, a man nevertheless, is treated worse than any animal.

Any reading, which regards Seneca's description as simply a philosophical stand against the morality of the spectators, would seem to be misjudged. His account of the audience's behaviour is not only preceded by, but comes as part of, the detailing of the actual physical combat. Indeed, this whole description, comprehensive and pointedly explicit of cruelty and injustice, would almost seem unnecessary, unless it were written by someone who did not condone the gladiatorial games and who particularly wanted to associate himself with that point of view. The spectators' reaction is, in fact, another aspect of the barbarism of the arena and it actually endorses Seneca's criticism. Thus, it is only by condemning themselves that the audience is able to justify the treatment of the men in the ring. Drawing us into the heat of the moment, Seneca quotes both himself and the audience directly. The victim, someone calls out, is not only a robber, but a murderer (*'Sed latrocinium fecit aliquis, occidit hominem*'), ironically the very title the spectators, whose focus is not that of justice, but the excitement of one man's violent and desperate treatment of another (*'Occide, verbera, ure!*') can now, by proxy, give themselves (*Quid ergo? quia occidit, ille meruit ut hoc pateretur: tu quid meruisti miser ut hoc spectes?* ep. 7.5). In a cynical paradox, the prisoner is scorned for his reluctance to fight and to commit the very crime for which he has just been condemned (*Quid? gladiatoribus quare populus irascitur, et tam inique ut iniuriam putet quod non libenter pereunt? contemni se indicat et uultu gestu ardos ex spectatore in adversarium vertitur, De Ira, 1.2.4*; 'Tell me, why do we see the people grow angry with gladiators, and so unjustly as to deem it an offence that they are not glad to die? They consider themselves affronted, and from mere spectators transform themselves into enemies,

In a fight between trained combatants, to go to one’s death willingly was an opportunity for the gladiator to display *virtus* and achieve glory (*ipsum vero quid accusas? num defuit gladiis? num repugnavit? num, ut gladiatoribus imperari solet, ferrum non recepit?* Cicero, *Pro Sestio,* 37.80; ‘But why accuse Sestius himself? Was not there enough of him for their swords? Did he resist? Did he not stand to be killed as gladiators are often ordered to do?’).62 The fortitude and resolution a gladiator might display at the possible moment of death was so important for the definition of Roman honour and identity that its public display might lead a gladiator back into Roman society and acceptance by the community. Barton describes the process as a ‘ritual of empowerment’, (1993) 35. As an example of *Romanitas,* the valour of gladiatorial contests lay in the achievement of fighting bravely and, if necessary, dying nobly.

It was not necessarily then a gladiator’s purpose to kill, but to demonstrate his power to overcome and defeat death.63 The gladiator who demonstrated this courage instilled in those who witnessed it, the possibility that they too could achieve the same victory over both circumstances and self (*Mors enim admota etiam inperitis animum dedit*

---

61 Translation by Basore, vol.1.

62 Translation by Yonge (1891). Cf. Petronius, *Satyricon,* 101.1. Cicero himself is described by the Elder Seneca as unwavering when his own death was demanded of him: *Prominenti ex lectica praebentique inmotam cervicem caput praecisum est,* (*Suasoriae,* 6.17; ‘He leaned from where he sat, and offered his neck without a tremor; his head was struck off.’). Translation by Winterbottom, vol.2. Wiedemann writes: ‘The connection between virtue and fighting in the Roman system of values is generally recognised...*Virtus* was a complex concept which could include a variety of components relating to private and peaceful activities as well as behaviour in public life and warfare.’ (1992) 35. See also pp.36ff.

63 See Wiedemann (1992) 35; 92; 105; 120; 165 and Futrell (1997) 3ff.
non vitandi inevitabilia; sic gladiator tota pugna timidissimus iugulum adversario praestat et errantem gladium sibi adtemperat, ep.30.8; ‘For death, when it stands near us, gives even to inexperienced men the courage not to seek to avoid the inevitable. So the gladiator, who throughout the fight has been no matter how fainthearted, offers his throat to his opponent and directs the wavering blade to the vital spot.’) See also ep.82.12; De Tranq. An.11.4; Pliny, Panegyricus, 33.1-2. By seeing how men faced the necessity of dying, by participating in (viewing) a fate they probably feared, Romans could, in a sense, confront their own mortality. Thus the man who did not fight bravely, who died unwillingly and ignobly, also dishonored the society which could redeem him. There was little sympathy then for the gladiator who valued his life too highly and was not prepared to shed any blood. Emphasising the moral achievements of virtue, courage, honesty and self-will, Seneca recognises the same concept: Auida est periculi uirtus et quo tendat, non quid passura sit cogitat, quoniam etiam quod passura est gloriae pars est. Militares uiri gloriantur uulneribus, laeti fluentem meliori casu sanguinem ostentant: idem licet fecerint qui integri reuertuntur ex acie, magis spectatur qui saucius reedit, (De Prov. 4.4; ‘True worth is eager for danger and thinks rather of its goal than of what it may have to suffer, since even what it will have to suffer is a part of its glory. Warriors glory in their wounds and rejoice to display the blood spilled with luckier fortune. Those who return from the battle unhurt may have fought as well, but the man who returns with a wound wins the greater regard.’).64 There was at the heart of the gladiatorial combat, therefore, the concept of the ‘equal opponent’ (Ignominiam iudicat gladiator cum inferiore componi et scit eum sine gloria uinci qui sine periculo uincitur, De Prov. 3.4; ‘A gladiator counts it a disgrace to

64 Translation by Basore, vol.1. Cf. Etenim si in gladiatoriis pugnis et infirmi generis hominum condicione atque fortuna timidos atque supplices et ut vivere liceat obsecrantis etiam odisse solemus, fortis atque animosos et se acriter ipsos morti offerentis servare cupimus, Cicero, Pro Milone. 34.92; ‘In fights between gladiators, involving the fates of the lowest sections of humanity, we find it natural to dislike timorous suppliants who whine to be allowed to keep their lives, whereas we feel eager, on the other hand, to save spirited and courageous fighters who dauntlessly expose themselves to death.’ Translation by Grant (1969 repr.1989) 271.
be matched with an inferior, and knows that to win without danger is to win without glory."). An 'equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph.'

This account of gladiatorial practice obviously depicts the ideal situation in which both gladiator and audience are tuned into and are knowingly aware of the larger social and ethical values at stake. This situation, however, could not be further from the events of ep.7 where the mood, lacking dignitas and prudentia, is merely vicious, where the aspirations of the audience, who lack moral incentive, are self-interested and vindictive and, where Seneca is then compelled to intervene in his own person, to try not only to divert the crowd's attention to recognise truthfully the events that are occurring before them, but also to acknowledge the consequences of their own actions in its continuance. The combats in the meridianum spectaculum in ep.7 can in no way be described as an opportunity to test a man's virtus or as a morally ennobling experience (for either the combatants or the audience), nor do they even appear as justice or the fair and rightful execution of men who have committed a crime. This is merely brutal and sordid fighting and it is as harmful for the audience as it is for the men in the ring.

Throwing the barbarism of the spectators' reactions back into their faces, Seneca represents the spectacle as their punishment, as he plays on the verb mereo (a rare use in the sense of 'to deserve' cf. Medea, 646). Seneca admits that the men in the ring have committed a crime and should be punished, but he also wonders what the audience

65 Translation by Basore, vol.1.

66 Caillois (1961) 14. 'The concept of the “equal opponent” was fundamental to the Roman warrior’s concept of glory...in an unequal fight both the contestants were debased, regardless of their rank and skills...a fundamental condition of gloria and dignitas was absent. Without the equal opponent there could be no valor.' Barton (1993) 28. See also pp.182-86. Gladiators were therefore appropriately paired, the advantage of one being compensated for by the strength of his opponent. See Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 46ff and fn.16 above.
MERA HOMICIDIA

has done to have to endure this sight. Addressing a nearby companion with ironic sympathy as miser, Seneca allows his contempt to show (tu quid meruisti miser ut hoc spectes?). The audience itself has become ‘criminal’ (cf. Non avaritia, non crudelitas modum novit. Et ista quamdiu furtim et a singulis fiunt minus noxia minusque monstruosa sunt: ex senatus consultis plebisque scitis saeva exercentur et publice iubentur vetata privatim, ep.95.30; ‘There are no limits to our greed, none to our cruelty. And as long as such crimes are committed by stealth and by individuals, they are less harmful and less portentous; but cruelties are practised in accordance with acts of senate and popular assembly, and the public is bidden to do that which is forbidden to the individual.’). To sit and watch the show is a punishment and the spectators are in their own way no less guilty than the man in the ring. Seneca’s reaction is direct and uncompromising, but his words would appear not even to have been heard. The audience’s response is an increasingly vociferous cry (an echo of the gladiatorial oath) for violence and death (‘Occide, verbera, ure!’). Seneca alone stands apart from them all.

This is not a narration about the spectators. It is about the gladiatorial games, the events it presents in the name of Roman culture and justice and the prospects it offers its citizens, both those in the ring and those out of it. And nor is the distinction between ordinary gladiatorial bouts and lunchtime executions the issue either, because the brutality Seneca witnessed is not presented as a single event to be distinguished separately (i.e. Mane leonibus et ursis homines, meridie spectatoribus suis obiciuntur cf. quidquid ante pugnatum est). The daylong duration of the games, which is emphasised throughout the description, holds out continuous expectation (intermissum est spectaculum) and the prospect of a fulfilment that is never allowed to wane (Haec fiunt dum vacat harena; ‘interim iugulentur homines, ne

67 Cf. non oportet peccata corrigere peccantem. ‘Quid ergo? non irascor latroni? Quid ergo? non irascar uenefico?’ Non... Omne poenae genus remedi loco ad moueo, De Ira, 1.16.1-2; ‘it is not right to correct wrong-doing by doing wrong. “What then?” you exclaim; “shall I not be angry with a robber? Shall I not be angry with a poisoner?” No...To every form of punishment will I resort, but only as a remedy.’). Basore’s translation, vol.1.
nihil agatur'). The meridianum spectaculum is a spectacle in keeping with the combats that have preceded. It is another event in a day of similar events, with all the qualities of what has gone before and implicitly what is to follow.\(^6\) In fact, if Seneca had wanted to condemn only the cruelty of the lunchtime show, he could have taken this opportunity to make a very effective comparison between it and the usual munera. Not only would this highlight the acceptability of the latter and his favourable attitude towards the munera, but the brutality of the lunchtime events and the irresponsibility of the audience would be even more explicit.

Seneca does not do this, because he wants to condemn the gladiatorial games, just as (although Wistrand claims otherwise, p. 37) he does elsewhere in his writings.\(^6\) One of Seneca’s most impassioned

---

\(^6\) Cagniart’s comment is short-sighted: ‘This letter cannot be used to claim Seneca’s moral opposition to gladiatorial combats. After all, the midday exhibition described in this passage has nothing to do with the performances of seasoned gladiators. It is the duel of unskilled and unwilling criminals.’ (2000) 612.

\(^6\) The consistency of Seneca’s attitude is underscored by the ambivalence of Cicero whose frequent remarks shift between approval and disapproval of the games (see fn.42). Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 191 classifies Cicero as generally in favour of the games cf. Crudele gladiatorum spectaculum et inhumanum non nullis videri solet, et haud scio an ita sit, ut mune fit, (Tusculan Disputations, 2.17.41; ‘A gladiatorial show is apt to seem cruel and brutal to some eyes, and I incline to think that it is so, as now conducted.’). Text and translation of the Tusculan Disputations are from The Loeb Classical Library edition by King: haec pueris et mulierculis et servis et servorum simillimis libera, gravi vero homini et ea, quae fiunt, iudicio certo ponderandi probari posse nullo modo, (De Officiis, 2.16.57; ‘This sort of amusement pleases children, silly women, slaves, and the servile free; but a serious-minded man who weighs such matters with sound judgment cannot possibly approve of them.’). Text and translation of De Officiis are from The Loeb Classical Library edition by Miller. Of any reservations, Auguet writes that Cicero was not ‘hostile...to the games themselves, but to the direction which he saw them taking.’ (p.26). As we have already noted, Marcus Aurelius was someone who condemned the games. Cassius Dio (72.29.3-4) writes how he was ‘so averse to the killing that, at
statements is a condemnation of Pompey's needless slaughter of elephants in the Circus. Against them, criminals were pitched hopelessly in desperate battle: *Princeps ciuitatis et inter antiques principes, ut fama tradidit, bonitatis eximiae memorabile putauit spectaculi genus nouo more perdere hominess. Depugnant? parum est. Lancinantur? parum est: ingenti mole animalium exterantur* (De Brev.Vit. 13.6; 'He, a leader of the state and one who, according to report, was conspicuous among the leaders of old for the kindness of his heart, thought it a notable kind of spectacle to kill human beings after a new fashion. Do they fight to the death? That is not enough! Are they torn to pieces? That is not enough! Let them be crushed by animals of monstrous bulk!').

The image is graphic and horrific and Seneca even questions whether he is serving any useful purpose in recalling this event (ad ullam rem bonam pertinet?). If this is a practice of such gross inhumanity that no man should undertake it, it would be even better if it could pass into forgetfulness and be lost to the history and memory of the state (Satius erat ista in obliuionem ire, ne quis postea potens disceret inuidetique rei minime humanae, De Brev.Vit. 13.7; 'Better would it be that these things pass into oblivion lest hereafter some all-powerful man should learn them and be jealous of an act that was nowise human.').

Rome, he attended combats in which the gladiators fought like athletes, without danger. For he did not allow them to be given sharp weapons.' (See Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 1.5; 6.46; 10.8). As emperor, however, Marcus Aurelius felt unable to refuse the populace's demand for the games and chose to continue them whenever he was out of Rome. In contrast, his son Commodus developed a passion for the arena which actually saw him taking on a gladiatorial role himself. See Wiedemann (1992) 61; 110; 131; 136ff and Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 170ff. Commodus was one of three emperors who entered the arena. Wiedemann writes that: 'The ultimate threat to established morality was for an emperor to appear in the arena himself as Caligula, Nero and Commodus did. Good emperors were expected to legislate against participation by persons of high status: that was not legislation against the games themselves.' (p.131 cf. 'Commodus' wish to enter consular office in AD 193 dressed as a gladiator was said to have led to his assassination,' p.110).

70 Translation by Basore, vol.2.
A statement in *ep.*95, which embraces generally the concept of the games, is more insistent: *Homo, sacra res homini, iam per lusum ac iocum occiditur et quem erudiri ad inferenda accipiendaque vulnera nefas erat, is iam nudus inermisque producitur satisfacque spectaculi ex homine mors est.* (*ep.*95.33; ‘Man, an object of reverence in the eyes of man, is now slaughtered for jest and sport; and those whom it used to be unholy to train for the purpose of inflicting and enduring wounds, are thrust forth exposed and defenceless; and it is a satisfying spectacle to see a man made a corpse.’).\(^72\) Without any narrowing of reference to a

---

\(^71\) Translation by Basore, vol.2. Although able to admit that Seneca finds this episode ‘simply revolting’, Cagniart writes that ‘if we read the text carefully, it is evident that his primary complaint concerns neither the fate of the animals nor of their opponents, but rather the dehumanizing effect of this botched execution on the spectators. The real victims are the spectators.’ (2000) 611. There is no justification for this statement, particularly if we do ‘read the text carefully’. In fact, Cagniart’s concentration on the welfare of the spectators and not the animals or criminals is almost farcical when applied to this incident in which it is well-known that the real audience was unable to endure this sight, and was so moved by horror and pity, that they rose up and shouted curses against Pompey (see Pliny, *Natural History*, 8.21; Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares*, 7.1.3). His statement that ‘it is a dangerous spectacle that desensitizes the public with the vicious shedding of blood’ is simply false. There is consequently no validation for saying that it is only Pompey’s ‘particular use’ of the *damnatio ad bestias* and not the nature of the event, to which Seneca objects.

\(^72\) Wistrand describes this passage as the ‘closest one can get’ to any ‘direct criticism...of gladiatorial shows as an institution in Seneca’s writings.’ (1990) 37. However, he also considers that ‘What Seneca really attacks here is the artless killing of people in disgraceful forms...and not the fights between trained gladiators.’ This is despite a footnote (p.37, fn.17) in which he states that he understands the phrase *quem erudiri ad inferenda accipiendaque vulnera nefas erat* ‘as referring to the training of gladiators’. He also adds that ‘The strong expression *nefas* should not be taken too literally.’ Its use is simply ‘to bring out a climax in *is iam nudus inermisque* etc., which follows.’ Wistrand’s explanation is difficult to accept. Seneca appears to be describing a decline in gladiatorial practices, which have always been questionable and wrong (*nefas*), but which are now totally barbaric and cruel. The antithesis between *quem erudiri ad inferenda accipiendaque vulnera* and *is iam nudus inermisque* underscores his point. Nor is *nefas* a word that can be taken lightly as Wistrand
particular type of combat, this passage conveys explicitly the affront to humanity, to justice, to cultural integrity, to fellow feeling and compassion that the games signify for Seneca. This abhorrence has already been revealed in ep.37. The oath sworn by the voluntary gladiator who is driven to enlist himself into this way of life and, whose very sustenance is ironically paid for by his blood, is described as *turpissimus* (*et illius turpissimi auctoramenti verba sunt: 'uri, vinciri ferroque necari', ep.37.2 cf. ep.71.23). By comparing this oath with a philosophic oath of virtue, Seneca's purpose is to exalt the moral resolution of the philosopher by comparison with the physical fortitude of the gladiator. But by quoting the specific words of the gladiator's oath, he also states directly the horrible consequences such a life entails, as he then further reveals with a few well-chosen details the iniquity and debasement of the gladiator's human condition and way of life (cf. *Cotidie comminiscimur per quae virilitati fiat iniuria, ut traducatur...alius genitalia excidit, alius in obscenam ludi partem fugit et, locatus ad mortem, infame armaturae genus in quo morbum suum exerceat legit. Nat. Quaest. 7.31.3; 'Daily we invent ways whereby an indignity may be done to manliness... One man cuts off(sic) his genitals, another flees to an indecent part of a gladiators' school; and, hired for death, he chooses a disgraceful type of armament to practise his sickness in.' ).

Degraded, disregarded and cut off from ordinary society (*Aspice illos iuvenes quos ex noblissimis domibus in harenam luxuria proiecit, 99.13; 'Note the youths of the noblest lineage whose extravagance has flung them into the arena;' see also *Nat. Quaest. 7.32.3*), the gladiator lives and eats with those who he might soon kill or by whom he will himself be killed (*De Ira, 2.8.2-3*).

It is not simply the *meridianum spectaculum*, but the gladiatorial games as a whole, that emerge from any of these passages as the object of Seneca's censure. His criticism in *ep.7* is part of a theme that pervades all his writings and it seems significant that he is not very far suggests, just as his casual reading of it can not be justified by quoting *Ludis interim aut gladiatoribus animum occupamus, Ad Helv. (17.1)*, a statement with no relevance to *ep.95*.

---

into the *Epistulae Morales* before he decides to take another stand against the games. Deliberately he chooses the most degraded type of combat which constituted a day at the games i.e. barbaric fighting which is unlikely to demonstrate even the pretence of *virtus* and noble distinction. The fighters, in fact, are men with no honour to win and absolutely no expectation of reward. That Seneca should choose this mode of combat is in itself a significant indicator of the strength of his feelings about the games because, although he is appalled and disgusted by what he sees, there was typically little sympathy for criminals subjected to this fate (cf. *nouissime ad poenas et has adhuc leues, reuocabiles decurrat; ultima supplicia sceleribus ultimis ponat, ut nemo pereat nisi quem perire etiam pereuntis interitis, De Ira*, 1.6.3; ‘Lastly, let him resort to punishment, yet still making it light and not irrevocable. Extreme punishment let him appoint only to extreme crime, so that no man will lose his life unless it is to the benefit even of the loser to lose it.’). At the same time, it was often regarded as a sign of weakness not to be able to witness bloodshed, especially the blood of criminals. A person’s ability to endure such spectacles was evidence of his own manliness and fortitude (*Visum est spectaculum inde non enerve nec fluxum, nec quod animos virorum molliret et frangeret, sed quod ad pulchra vulnera contemptumque mortis accenderet, cum in servorum*

74 Translation by Basore, vol.1. Shelton comments how ‘the Romans reduced some humans, whom they considered irrational and hostile, to the same category as animals, that is, they “dehumanized” them and therefore felt no moral constraint against torturing and killing them.’ (2000) 90 cf. ‘The entire context of the events which went on in the arena militated against the expression of anxieties about the suffering of criminals. The process of taking the life of another human being itself elicited feelings of anxiety...different modes of execution sought to minimise those anxieties; but that was not the same as having any reservations about the need to destroy hostile animals, prisoners-of-war or convicted criminals.’ Wiedemann (1992) 139.

75 See Wiedemann (1992) 138-9. He quotes Pseudo-Quintilian: ‘there are some adults who cannot even look at blood, and many who turn away from the wounds suffered by gladiators,’ (*esse quosdam maiores qui ne consipere quidem crurorem sufficerent: multi se a gladiatorum vulneribus avertunt*, p.162, fn. 26).
Next came a public entertainment — nothing lax or dissolute to weaken and destroy the manly spirit of his subjects, but one to inspire them to face honourable wounds and look scorn on death, by exhibiting love of glory and desire for victory even in the persons of criminals and slaves.\textsuperscript{76} cf. Cicero, \textit{Tusculan Disputations}, 2.17.41. Seneca is striking at a fundamental notion of the games (and of Roman culture and thought) which could encourage and sanction cruelty.

Seneca knew that the punishment of criminals was necessary and did not deny that public justice should be a deterrent.\textsuperscript{77} But even as the games (which fulfil the Stoic concept of pleasure as \textit{vitium}) distort the ordinary idea of pleasure and turn it into a shameful and degrading form of occupation or amusement, it is difficult for Seneca to account for such cruelty in terms of justice or to acknowledge it as rational, principled and appropriate action (\textit{mouet mentes et atrox pictura et iustissimorum suppliciorum tristis aspectus}, \textit{De Ira}, 2.2.4; ‘our minds are perturbed by a shocking picture and by the melancholy sight of punishment even when it is entirely just’).\textsuperscript{78} He is unable, as Cicero does, to comment

\textsuperscript{76} Translation by Radice, vol.2.

\textsuperscript{77} See for example \textit{De Ira}, 1.6.1-5; 1.15.1ff; 1.16.1ff; 1.19.7; \textit{De Clem.} 1.22.1. The fundamental premise underlying Seneca’s argument on this issue is that punishment should never be carried out in anger or with hatred (\textit{De Ira}, 1.16.1) and that it should be bestowed with judgment (\textit{De Ira}, 1.15.2). Punishment has degrees, where mild and moderate punishment is the most acceptable and where harshness is an extreme which should only be a last resort (\textit{De Ira}, 1.6.3; \textit{De Clem.} 1.22.1). In some instances where reform is impossible, it is possible that death can actually be a kindness (\textit{De Ira}, 1.19.7) and the truest form of pity (\textit{De Ira}, 1.16.3), although this ending should not be brutal or unkind. Seneca is motivated in all that he says by a humanitarian interest in his fellow man (both the criminal and the victims who suffer at his hands) and by a concern for every man’s individual integrity and self-respect (\textit{De Ira}, 1.19.5ff).

\textsuperscript{78} Basore’s translation, vol.1. Wistrand relies on Seneca’s patent objection to ‘sadism’ (1990) 38 to enforce his argument that Seneca only objects to the
dispassionately that a gladiatorial show can be cruel to some eyes, but to also comment pragmatically on the educative value of combats involving criminals: *Crudele gladiatorum spectaculum et inhumanum meridianum spectaculum*, asserting more than once Seneca’s criticism of unwarranted public cruelty e.g. ‘the artless killing of people in disgraceful forms’ (p.37) or ‘mere executions performed with the intention to amuse the spectators’ (p.38). In fact, this idea provides the culmination of his closing argument: ‘Seneca never condemns either gladiatorial shows or executions, and what made him upset was not the *fact* that criminals were executed in the arena, but the *way* they were executed, and that is consistent with his principles.’ (p.46). This enables Wistrand to use Seneca’s fundamental humanitarianism to make him critical of the arena executions, yet exempt from applying it to the games proper. He does acknowledge that logically it might be assumed that ‘Seneca, in accordance with his humanitarian *credo*…ought to have condemned gladiatorial shows as well as staged hunts and executions.’ (p.38). And, while he further admits that ‘There is no reason to believe that he was particularly fond of watching gladiators,’ he accounts for Seneca’s approval of the gladiatorial games by what he incongruously (cf. *ep.*7.3-5) describes as ‘a feeling of social contempt for the performers of the arena, a lack of respect that made him less interested in what happened to them.’ (p.38). Cagniart also writes of Seneca’s ‘contempt for the performers’ (2000) 608, adding later with regard to *ep.*7 that ‘it is evident that…Seneca does not care for the fate of the criminals. They deserve to die for their crimes, he tells us.’ (p. 612). Wistrand’s citation of *eppp.*37.1; 70.19; 99.13 and *Nat Quaest.* 7.32.3 does not corroborate either his or Cagniart’s statements. *Epistles* 70.19 (*utilissimae sortis homines et sordida exempla*); 99.13 (*Aspice illos iuvenes quos ex noblissimis domibus in harenam luxuria proiecit*) and *Nat. Quaest.* 7.32.3 (*Deinde, sub persona cum dui trita frons est, transitur ad galeam*) are statements of social condition and fact. Gladiators were men of the lowest status who were often forced into this way of life to survive, a point Cagniart also seems to overlook when he cites *ep.*70.22, 25, 27 as proof of Seneca’s condemnation of gladiators. At the same time, any contempt in *ep.*99.13 actually centres on the word *luxuria*, the moral *vitium* which has degraded these noble youths, and not the arena, while in *ep.*70 Seneca’s point is actually to laud the arena performers who, despite their debasement, are able to act nobly. Similarly, Seneca’s description of the oath as *turpissimus* in *ep.*37 is not criticism of gladiators as individuals but the institution of the games, its social structures and expectations. What is surely more important about Wistrand’s commentary is that he is never able to cite a passage in which Seneca defends the games uncompromisingly (cf. the ambivalence of *Ad Helv.*17.1).  

126
non nullis videri solet...cum vero sones ferro depugnabant, auribus fortasse multae, oculis quidem nulla poterat esse fortior contra dolorem et mortem disciplina, (Tusculan Disputations, 2.17.41; ‘A gladiatorial show is apt to seem cruel and brutal to some eyes... But in the days when it was criminals who crossed swords in the death struggle, there could be no better schooling against pain and death at any rate for the eye, though for the ear perhaps there might be many.’). The issue is not whether criminals should be punished, but how justice is used as justification for communal indulgence and pleasurable gratification, these experiences of diversion, expectation and excitement seemingly standing for the concepts of honour, fortitude, noble glory and virtus which are supposed to govern the games. Even while he is describing the unwillingness of criminals to go to their death in ep.7, Seneca knows that he could equally be describing the actions of a gladiator, trained but nevertheless unwilling, and he knows that there would be little difference in the reaction of the crowd and the cruelty and despair of the procedure (e.g. Cicero, Pro Milone, 34.92; Pro Sestio, 37.80). The spectators who endow a gladiator with honour and vindicate him socially are those who will just as readily take pleasure in his wounding, his humiliation or his death (cf. homini perdere hominem libet, ep.103.2; ‘But man delights to ruin man.’). So it was that when the voluntary gladiator who had abandoned society and enrolled himself in the gladiatorial ranks was defeated, the enjoyment of the audience was greater than ever. The cruel pleasure disguised in ep.7 as the execution of justice suggests the easy acceptance an audience will give to the death, the punishment or degradation of the ordinary gladiator. One type of combat reflects and comments on the other.

Seneca has watched the events of ep.7 with his own and different perspective and has involved himself directly in them so that, without any of the distance of abstract commentary, ep.7 is ‘alive’ with the energy of Seneca’s attitude and first-hand insight. A graphic narrative, peopled dramatically with verbose and ugly characters, the ep.7 episode

79 Translation by King.

80 For example, Juvenal, Satires, 8.183-211; Petronius, Satyricon, 45; see Wiedemann (1992) 102ff; Auguet (1972 repr.2003) 155ff.
is framed and motivated by the tension of Seneca’s horror, the brutal exuberance of the spectators and the crippling fear of the participants. These men, who are afraid to kill and are afraid to be killed, are eventually compelled to both by the blood-thirst of those watching. The fighters’ fear is merely bait for the audience’s enthusiasm. For a brief moment we look into the minds of both combatant and spectator and experience the emotion of each (‘Occide, verbera, ure! Quare tam timide incurrir in ferrum? quare parum audacter occidit? quare parum libenter moritur?’ ep.7.5). Each imperative is matched by a rhetorical question, the anaphora of quare an urgent insistence of the barbarism of man against man. The victim, unable to help himself and scorned for it, is nothing more than an object who is there for the amusement of others. In human terms, he means nothing to the audience and he is lost to himself too. Ironically, the way in to these events has been prepared by thoughts of misericordia and a use of nugae (omissis nugis) which then turns out to be cynically incongruous. At the same time, Seneca has no hesitation in stating bluntly that these events are nothing but mera homicidia (quidquid ante pugnatum est misericordia fuit; nunc omissis nugis mera homicidia sunt).

Seneca’s exposition of his outing to the games is a biting and incisive rebuke against the sport of death (exitus pugnantium mors est, ep.7.4). The gladiatorial games were, from their inception associated with death (see fn.11), but death was also their process and outcome (e.g. Nihil habent quo tegantur; ad ictum totis corporibus expositi; non galea, non scuto repellitur ferrum; Ferro et igne res geritur. Plagis agatur in vulnera, mutuos ictus nudis et obviis pectoribus excipient). And death could be inevitable (munquam frustra manum mittunt... Quo munimenta? quo artes? omnia ista mortis morae sunt), because the spectators might demand nothing less (Interfectores interfectoris iubent obici et victorem in aliam detinent caedem ...Intermissum est spectaculum: ‘interim iugulentur homines, ne nihil agatur’). The games represent the actions of men against men and in this situation the word mutuos, a word which should, in the surrounding context (e.g. epp.5.4; 6.3ff; 8.1-2), have positive ramifications, develops a sickly ring (mutuos ictus nudis et obviis pectoribus excipient). In fact, the whole episode in ep.7 is a grotesque affront to human sensibilities.
It can not be denied that the world in which Seneca lived was a violent world, a warrior state in which war was part of the culture. In fact, it seems that it was during the first two centuries AD, when the Augustan peace throughout the Empire offered small opportunity for citizens to take part in actual warfare, that the popularity of the *munera* increased. Auguet calls the early contests 'the fossilized image of Roman conquests' (1972 repr.2003) 195, the amphitheatre standing for 'a political temple that housed the mythic reenactment of the cult of Roman statehood. The struggle of the gladiator embodied an idealized and distilled version of the military ethic of *Romanitas*.\^81 Seneca, whose own plays provoke examination 'on the atrocities of war and the process of victimization',\^82 had necessarily, therefore, to live with violence (public or private, direct or indirect) throughout his life. What he could not live with, however, or rather what he could not (if possible) let go unnoticed, was unnecessary violence, violence for pleasure, violence marked by persecution and exploitation, violence of desperation and fear and violence without *virtus*, honour and integrity, where the opportunity for self-vindication, noble fortitude or simply survival could be lost or won by the decision of a crowd out of control,\^83 an emperor's whim or desire for popularity.\^84 The failure of

\^81 Futrell (1997) 8. Hopkins speaks of the games as 'artificial battlefields' where the Romans 'created battlefield conditions for public amusement... War had been converted into a game, a drama repeatedly played of cruelty, violence, blood and death.' (1983) 29. See also Wiedemann (1992) 3-7.

\^82 Shelton (2000) 88. See also Varner (2000) 119 and Boyle (1997) 32. Barton writes: 'One only has to read, to begin with, *De ira*, *Oedipus*, *Thyestes*, or *Hippolytus* in order to get very strong doses of the violence of Seneca's imagination. Seneca was, like Lucan, and Augustine's Alypius, fascinated and obsessed with the violence he often decries.' (1993) 23, fn.43.

\^83 Cf. *epp*.95.30, 33; *De Clem.*1.13.2; 1.25.1-2; 1.26.3; 2.4.2; *De Ira*, 2.5.3.

\^84 Pliny writes of Domitian: *Demens ille verique honoris ignarus, qui crimina maiestatis in harena colligebat, ac se despici et contemni, nisi etiam gladiatores eius veneraremur, sibi male dici in illis, suam divinitatem suum numen violari interpretabatur, cumque se idem quod deos, idem gladiatores quod se putabant,
these situations to recognise humanity’s purpose is apparent when he writes of cruelty in De Ira: Quae ista saeuitia est? Liceat ultimum spiritum trahere, da exiturae animae locum, liceat illum non per ulnus emittere, (De Ira, 3.19.4; ‘What savagery is this? Let a man draw his last breath, leave a passage for his departing soul, let it have some other course of exit than a wound!). Indeed, he would almost seem to have the victims of ep.7 in mind here.

Epistle 7 begins with the philosophical issue of moral ‘safety’, but while this underscores the description of the games, Seneca is really motivated by his own hatred and criticism of the gladiatorial games as a public event and institution. If he had just wanted to illustrate the moral danger of a crowd, he did not have to choose the games particularly (e.g. De Ira, 2.8.1; De Otio, 1.1), or even identify a public forum (e.g. ep.94.69-71; De Clem. 1.1; De Vita Beata, 1.4-5; De Ira, 3.8.1-2). Nor did he have to go to such lengths in the precision, detail and energy of his exposition. His description of the games and the behaviour of the audience is not simply a metaphor for man’s moral iniquity. Gladiatorial games were a real and important event in the life of Romans and Roman society and Seneca questions their existence and challenges their social relevance. Within this setting, the behaviour of the spectators becomes another issue of complaint.

Undoubtedly, there are also philosophical issues which would have influenced Seneca in his stand. Seneca was a Stoic and he was guided in all areas of his life by Stoic notions of man’s fellowship with man. In the Epistulae Morales, Seneca has already taken the time in ep.5 to put forth these concepts: Hoc primum philosophia promittit, sensum communem,86 humanitatem,87 et congregationem;88 a qua (Panegyricus, 33.4; ‘He was a madman, blind to the true meaning of his position, who used the arena for collecting charges of high treason, who felt himself slighted and scorned if we failed to pay homage to his gladiators, taking any criticism of them to himself and seeing insults to his own godhead and divinity; who deemed himself the equal of the gods yet raised his gladiators to be his equal.’). Translation by Radice, vol.2.

85 Translation by Basore, vol.1.
86 Epistles 48.2-3 and 95.52-3, in which the phrase sensum communem is specifically echoed, are the most elaborate statements of this doctrine in the Epistulae Morales (in commune vivitur, 48.2; et iudicat aliquod esse commune ius generis humani; omnia enim cum amico communia habebit, 48.3; Habeamus in commune, 95.53; see also De Otio, 3.5; De Tranq. An. 4.3-4; De Ira, 1.5.3; De Clem. 1.3.2). The phrase sensus communis (cf. ep.9.21) has been translated by Summers (1910 repr. 1965) 153 as ‘the feelings natural to all men’ (i.e. Sensum ipsum, qui communis dicitur, ubi discet, cum se a congressu, qui non hominibus solum sed mutis quoque animalibus naturalis est, segregarii? Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, 1.2.20; ‘And where shall he acquire that instinct which we call common feeling, if he secludes himself from that intercourse which is natural not merely to mankind but even to dumb animals?’; Butler’s translation, vol.1 cf. Horace, Satires, 1.3.66).

87 Humanitas combined in its conception the equivalent Greek ideas of φιλανθρωπία and παιδεία (cf. Pliny, Epistles, 8.24.2). Bringing together these two notions as a single concept, Roman humanitas ‘means literary culture, the virtue of humanity, and the state of civilization’ Veyne (1993) 342, its virtue being ‘composed of pity, gentleness, affability, simplicity, and interest in the fate of others.’ (Veyne, p.352). See ep.88.30; Cicero, Ad Atticum, 4.6.1; Epictetus, Discourses, 1.6.26; Tacitus, Agricola, 21.1-2; Cicero, De Finibus, 5.19.54 cf. Tusculan Disputations, 2.5.13. Humanitas could be an attribute of either an individual or society (Veyne, p.343), and might manifest itself in the world of politics (Cicero, Epistulae ad Quintum Fratrem, 1.1.24-5; 27-29; Pliny, Epistles, 9.5; Isocrates, Antidosis, 131-33), oratory (Cicero, De Oratore, Book 1), in attitudes towards slavery (ep.47.5; Tacitus, Histories, 4.64) or behaviour in warfare (Cicero, De Officiis, 1.11.35; 1.24.82). To a large extent, it is basically in terms of love for one’s fellow-man that Seneca tends to regard humanitas (Humanitas vetat superbum esse adversus socios, vetat avarum; verbis, rebus, affectibus comem se facilemque omnibus praestat; nullum alienum malum putat, bonum autem suum qued quod aliqui bonus futurum est amat, ep.88.30; ‘Kindliness forbids you to be over-bearing towards your associates, and it forbids you to be grasping. In words and in deeds and in feelings it shows itself gentle and courteous to all men. It counts no evil as another’s solely. And the reason why it loves its own good is chiefly because it will some day be the good of another.’ See also epp.81.26; 104.4-5; De Tranq. An.10.6). Humanitas was the duty of all men and one more stringent than the law (De Ira, 2.28.2; De Ira, 3.43.5). Its virtue is also its rarity (in homine rarum humanitas bonum, ep.115.3).
professione dissimilitudo nos separabit, (ep.5.4; ‘The first thing which philosophy undertakes to give is fellow-feeling with all men; in other words, sympathy and sociability. We part company with our promise if we are unlike other men.’). This is the Stoic doctrine of brotherhood (usque ad ultimum uitae finem in actu erimus, non desinemus communi bono operam dare, adiuare singulos, opem ferre etiam inimicis senili manu, De Otio, 1.4; ‘We shall engage in affairs to the very end of life, we shall never cease to work for the common good, to help each and all, to give aid even to our enemies when our hand is feeble with age.’).89 All men are in some sense brothers, united by human fellowship and common sympathy (ad coetum geniti sunt, salua autem esse societas nisi custodia et amore partium non potest, De Ira, 2.31.7; ‘all are born for a life of fellowship, and society can be kept unharmed only by the mutual protection and love of its parts.’)90, this community of association being more important than the political or geographical community into which a man is born (De Otio, 4.1; Cicero, De Finibus, 3.19.62; 5.23.65). In fact, this is a bond which philosophia promittit (Ego sic utiam quasi sciam aliis esse me natum et naturae rerum hoc nomine gratias agam... hominibus prodesse natura me iubet, De Vita Beata, 20.3; 24.3; ‘As for me, I shall always live as if I were aware that I had been born for service to others and on this account I shall render my

88 Congregatio expressed the idea of social community, participation and commonality. Cicero’s use of congregatio emphasises this idea: Quodque nemo in summa solitudine vitam agere velit ne cum infinita quidem voluptatum abundantia, facile intellegitur nos ad coniunctionem congregationemque hominum et ad naturalem communitatem esse natos, (De Finibus, 3.20.65; ‘And the fact that no one would care to pass his life alone in a desert, even though supplied with pleasures in unbounded profusion, readily shows that we are born for society and intercourse, and for a natural partnership with our fellow men.’ Text and translation are from the Loeb Classical library edition by Rackham. See also 4.2.4; De Republica, 1.25.39).

89 Translation by Basore, vol.2. See also De Clem. 2.5.2-3; De Ben. 1.15.2; De Tranq. An.1.10-12.

90 Basore’s translation, vol.1.
thanks to Nature... Nature bids me do good to all mankind”)\textsuperscript{91} and it is part of the law of Nature (e.g. \textit{De Ben.} 3.18.2; 4.17.3; 7.19.8-9; \textit{De Clem.} 1.18.2; 1.19.1-2). The \textit{munera} are a violation of this concept. Even the relationship between the \textit{lanista} (the owner of a group of gladiators) and the gladiator is one of slavery, not mutual association. Following the payment that a volunteer gladiator received upon taking the gladiatorial oath, the \textit{lanista} then had ultimate sanction over his life (cf. 87.15).\textsuperscript{92} This allowed a gladiator to be maimed or killed at the master’s behest (cf. \textit{Tanquam legitimi gladiatores domino corpora animasque religiosissime addicimus}, Petronius, \textit{Satyricon}, 117; ‘We pledged our bodies and souls to our master most solemnly, like regular gladiators.’).\textsuperscript{93}

Seneca knows that justice is necessary, but what he sees at the games is a perversion of the concept.\textsuperscript{94} Although this method of _______

\textsuperscript{91} Translation by Basore, vol. 2.

\textsuperscript{92} Auguet writes of the \textit{lanista} that: ‘In the eyes of the Romans he was regarded as both a butcher and a pimp. He played the role of scapegoat; it was upon him that society cast all the scorn and contempt aroused by an institution which reduced men to the status of merchandise or cattle.’ (1972 repr.2003) 31. See Wiedemann (1992) 28-30 cf. Livy, 28.21.

\textsuperscript{93} Text and translation are from The Loeb Classical Library edition by Heseltine.

\textsuperscript{94} Cf. \textit{vivebant laceri membris stillantibus artus /inque omni nusquam corporis corpus erat. /denique supplicium.../vel domini iugulum foderat ense nocens /templa vel arcano demens spoliaverat auro...in quo, quae fuerat fabula, poena fuit,} (Martial, \textit{De Spectaculis Liber}, 7.5-12; ‘His mangled limbs lived, though the parts dripped gore, and in all his body was nowhere a body’s shape. A punishment deserved at length he won - he in his guilt had with his sword pierced his parent’s or his master’s throat, or in his madness robbed a temple of its close-hidden gold, or had laid by stealth his savage torch to thee, O Rome. Accursed, he had outdone the crimes told of by ancient lore; in him that which had been a show before was punishment.’ Text and translation are from Ker’s two volume edition of Martial’s epigrams in The Loeb Classical Library, vol.1; \textit{Demens ille verique honoris ignarus, qui criminia maiestatis in harena}}
punishing the murderer with murder or making the criminal acknowledge his crime publicly might satisfy the social conscience, it also seems to encourage greater harshness in the treatment of criminals (i.e. 'Occide, verbera, ure!' cf. Martial, De Spectaculis Liber, 22.12). In fact, it is the brutality of the games that is, whether from enjoyment or horror, their most compelling aspect. Even Seneca could not draw his eyes away, nor did he simply leave (cf. Augustine’s account of Alypius, Confessions, 6.8, fn.23 above). If public justice should serve as an example and be a deterrent (De Ira, 1.15.1ff; 1.16.1ff; 1.19.7; De Clem. 1.22.1 cf. Aulus Gellius, Noctes Atticae, 7.14.1-4), this is not the lesson that the spectators at this meridianum spectaculum are taking away with them (cf. De Ira, 1.6.5). They are simply enjoying themselves (cf. Petronius, Satyricon, 45) and are, as Seneca represents it, willing enough to commit their own ‘crime’. The violence Seneca depicts is unwarranted, feeding off itself in a frenzy of desire. Distinguishing ep.7 from other letters, Seneca has become a social critic. Whether the combat is between gladiators or criminals, the underlying premises of the munera, which can elevate and laud the man who is degraded and outside social boundaries, but which will always degrade a man anyway, which rely on death (often savage, inhumane and undignified) as a way of life and which turn the serious business of punishment into entertainment with no other purpose but diversion, are paradoxical and false. Hence the victories and the glory of the games are artificial, its justice is exploitative and abusive and, while its assumptions about man’s equality are wrong (De Prov. 3.4; De Ben. 5.3.3),95 its pleasure is delusive, its moral purpose indeterminate and its social function equivocal.

colligebat, (Pliny, Panegyricus, 33.4; ‘He was a madman, blind to the true meaning of his position, who used the arena for collecting charges of high treason’). Radice’s translation, vol.2.

95 Barton emphasises how ‘The risks of dying in the arena were not equally distributed among all combatants. Condemned criminals had little or no chance of surviving. The odds of prisoners of war, slaves and volunteers varied greatly, depending on their skill and courage and rank, and on the liberality of the producer of the games.’ (1993) 13, fn. 9.
Seneca presumably would have understood the deeper symbolic significance of the gladiatorial games in Roman culture. His use of gladiatorial metaphors is a case in point. In broad terms, the arena had become a symbol of Roman society, where all classes came together in communal purpose, the achievements there reflecting Roman superiority in the larger world outside: 'the arena...symbolically divided off what was Roman from what was not. It was the limit of Roman civilization in a number of senses. The arena was the place where civilization confronted nature in the shape of beasts which represented a danger to humanity; and where social justice confronted wrongdoing, in the shape of criminals who were executed there; and where the Roman empire confronted its enemies, in the persons of the captured prisoners of war who were killed or forced to kill one another in the arena.'

In the arena, the Romans witnessed the conquest of civilized order over lawlessness and barbarism. The displays that occurred there reaffirmed the social, moral and political order of things and citizens were reassured of Rome's supremacy as a culture and civilization, even her conquest of Nature.

For Seneca, however, the reality of the games had a different significance which overshadowed and buried its symbolism. Instead, Seneca finds a brutality of man against man and a cruel distortion of the ideas of humanitas, dignitas, virtus, fortitudo, iustitia, prudentia, congregatio and sensus communis.

One might perhaps express this as simply as Edward Gibbon does in his commentary on ep.7, when he

---

96 Wiedemann (1992) 46. See also pp.169; 180 and Shelton (2000) 90-2. Futrell comments pointedly: 'The gladiatorial battles accomplished no strategic gain, led to no diplomatic arrangements. Their meaning and significance was as a means of communicating the message of Imperial authority; the medium of spectacular death was a persuasive piece of performative rhetoric.' (1997) 2. See also p. 4.

97 One can recollect the gladiatorial exempla Seneca cites in ep.70.19-26. These were men who took the opportunity to kill themselves rather than go into the ring. They chose death and proved their worth in a way that the combatants in ep.7 cannot.
remarks that: 'Seneca shews the feelings of a man'. Indeed, Seneca knew how often the games were merely occasions to satisfy the pleasure and expectations of the audience, how the motivation behind them was sometimes merely that of individual ambition or an event staged to accommodate the politics of the moment or advance the popularity of the emperor. The munera were a world of moral and human contradiction and ambivalence and the linch pin of Seneca’s criticism, as he demonstrates in ep.7, was their barbarism. The munera were an event (whether entertainment, justice, the glory of combat, social elevation and freedom) which perverted and debased man’s relationship with man and consequently his relationship with himself — his integrity, his honour, his morality, his reason, his humanity (cf. et satietate in

98 Gibbon (1781) vol.2, ch.30, n.59.

99 Cf. Et ecce habituri sumus munus excellente in trido die festa; familia non lanistica, sed plurimi liberti. Et Titus noster magnum animum habet et est caldicerebrius; aut hoc aut illud erit, quid utique. Nam illi domesticus sum, non est miscix. Ferrum optimum daturus est, sine fuga carnarium in medio, ut amphitheatere videat. Petronius, Satyricon, 45; ‘Just think, we are soon to be given a superb spectacle lasting three days; not simply a troupe of professional gladiators, but a large number of them freedmen. And our good Titus has a big imagination and is hot-headed; it will be one thing or another, something real anyway. I know him well and he is all against half-measures. He will give you the finest blades, no running away, butchery done in the middle, where the whole audience can see it.’ Translation by Heseltine.

100 Cicero comments in De Officiis how the games are demanded by the people, but that while wealthy men and men in power might provide them, they need to be kept within means (De Officiis, 2.16.55-17.60). Cicero’s letters and speeches contain numerous references to private individuals who put on munera at great expense to themselves in order to increase their prospects of election to office (cf. Sen. De Ben.2.21.5-6). In order to win the consulship in 52 BC, Milo, for example, is said to have given some lavish games which used up three separate inheritances (Pro Milone, 95; Pro Sestio, 54.116; Epistulae ad Quintum Fratrem, 3.8.6). See Pro Murena, 19.38-40; Petronius, Satyricon, 45; 119.17-18; Suetonius, Caligula, 38.4. Cicero also comments in Pro Murena 36.77 how the Roman ancestors approved the games but not their use for political aggrandizement.
obliuionem clementiae uenit et omne foedus humanum eicet animo, nouissime in crudelitatem transit; rident itaque gaudentque et voluptate multa perfruuntur...per otium saeui, De Ira, 2.5.3; ‘and [when] surfeit has arrived at a disregard for mercy and has expelled from the mind every conception of the human bond, it passes at last into cruelty. And so these men laugh and rejoice and experience great pleasure... making a pastime of ferocity.’." 101 Like a chameleon, cruelty (saevitia) shifts and changes its mood and colour, until it becomes a joy to kill another person (Hoc est, quare vel maxime abominanda sit saevitia, quod excedit fines primum solitos, deinde humanos, nova supplicia conquirit, ingenium advocat ut instrumenta excogitet per quae varietur atque extendatur dolor, delectatur malis hominum; tunc illi dirus animi morbus ad insaniam pervenit ultimam, cum crudelitas versa est in voluptatem et iam occidere hominem iuvat, De Clementia, 1.25.2; ‘The reason why brutality is most of all abhorred is this; because it transgresses first all ordinary, and then all human, bounds, searches out new kinds of torture, calls ingenuity into play to invent devices by which suffering may be varied and prolonged, and takes delight in the afflictions of mankind; then indeed the dread disease of that man’s mind has reached the farthest limit of insanity, when cruelty has changed into pleasure and to kill a human being now becomes a joy.’. 102 This is the transgression of all human (and humane) boundaries and action without impunity.

Not public convention, social rule or customary ritual, nor even the law can justify for Seneca action that intrudes upon and destroys man’s humanitas (quam angusta innocentia est ad legem bonum esse! Quanto latius officiorum patet quam iuris regula! Quam multa pietas humanitas liberalitas iustitia fides exigunt, quae omnia extra publicas tabulas sunt! De Ira, 2.28.2; ‘how limited is the innocence whose standard of virtue is the law! How much more comprehensive is the principle of duty than that of law! How many are the demands laid upon us by the sense of duty, humanity, generosity, justice, integrity – all of

101 Translation by Basore, vol.1.

102 Translation by Basore, vol.1.
which lie outside the statute books.’). Motivated by his ‘humanitarianism’, and concerned not only for individual man but for the well-being of society, Seneca stood out during his career from the violence and barbarism of his age on more issues than just the gladiatorial games. Early on in the Epistulae Morales, he speaks about the need to encourage humanitas and human fellowship (ep.5.4), and these are the principles upon which the institutions of society should also be founded. Hence in ep.7, Seneca suddenly finds himself motivated by a louder voice than the pedagogy of Stoicism to speak out as a man in the interests of his fellow-man and as a Roman for the good of society. He condemns the games because he wants real mercy (misericordia, ep.7.3) and a real and humane form of justice and because he wants his fellow citizens to want this too (i.e. verbis, rebus, afectibus comem se facilemque omnibus praestat [humanitas] ... Numquid liberalia studia hos mores praecipiunt? non magis quam simplicitatem, quam modestiam ac moderationem, non magis quam frugalitatem ac parsimoniam, non magis quam clementiam, quae alieno sanguini tamquam suo parcit et scit homini non esse homine prodige utendum, ep.88.30; ‘In words and in deeds and in feelings [kindliness] shows itself gentle and courteous to all men... Do “liberal studies” teach a man such character as this? No; no more than they teach simplicity, moderation and self-restraint, thrift and economy, and that kindliness which spares a neighbour’s life as if it were one’s own and knows that it is not for man to make wasteful use of his fellow-man.’). Seneca is speaking in ep.7 as a Roman with his attention upon society, and although the symbolism and public function and the popularity of the games means that he will probably not effect any change in attitude or practice (or possibly even elicit a positive response e.g. ep.7.5), Seneca knows that he cannot and should not simply remain silent. It is not actually a criminal’s life that is at stake, but the normalcy, the dignity, the honour and the heritage of society. As Seneca (quoting Terence, Heautontimorumenos, 77) reiterates in ep.95, no subject is exempt when dealing with man’s lot (homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto, ep.95.53; “I am a man; and nothing in man’s lot / Do I deem foreign to me.’). Epistle 7 began with the issue of moral ‘safety’. From another perspective, there is also the ‘safety’ of gladiators and condemned

103 Translation by Basore, vol.1.
criminals and the ‘safety’ of the crowd, that is to say, the ‘safety’ of society.

For a brief but determined moment, Seneca stands outside society and criticises it. The independent nature of the ‘games’ episode in ep. 7 is its own assertion of this social stance. Although Seneca’s description of the meridianum spectaculum does initially seem to illustrate the opening theme of the letter about the danger of the crowd, it then stands apart and is memorable in itself for the images and events it portrays, for the kind of people it presents and for what it alone has to say about human nature, social behaviour and cultural patterns and structures. Indeed, it is probably this episode alone that stands out in one’s memory when one thinks back on ep. 7, even as it is possibly one of the most memorable events of the whole of the Epistulae Morales. Seneca uses every stylistic device to ensure this emphasis, but more importantly he uses his own presence as spectator, participant and commentator to guarantee its vivid and graphic nature. The games, at which he popped in so casually and in which he then so deliberately involved himself, turned out to be no ordinary event with no ordinary consequences. Seneca’s expression of his horror, i.e. his contradiction of popular attitude, is plainly something with which he wanted to be associated and, so it would seem, for which he wanted to be remembered. Seneca knows that there may be few people who will listen to him or agree with what he says (cf. ep. 7.5), but in an age when critical voices against the games were in the minority, he knows it is worth making the effort. Seneca the Roman has his own voice and it does not always accord with accepted convention. If we want to deny that he was a critic of the games, we take away this voice. What we are then left with, and what cannot be erased, are the images (brutal, frightening and inhuman) of ep. 7. They in themselves tell their own story.

Christine Richardson-Hay
University of Auckland
Bibliography


