THE BEST A MAN CAN GET:  
GROOMING SCIPIO IN SENeca EPISTLE 86

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his article is an attempt to add to fertile recent readings of Seneca Epistle 86, the letter reporting on a visit to Scipio Africanus’ country house—complete with “antique” bath and olive grove—at Liternum. In order to show how much Seneca packs into this letter, I argue, we need to understand more about the metaphorics and poetics of the bathhouse in Roman imperial literature. Without rehearsing the entire rhizomatic system of Seneca’s referencing in Ep. 86, my aim is to flesh out the satiric body of Scipio’s villa-bath-garden compound, and to propose ways in which myths of Scipionic grooming help to propel the fascinating momentum of doubling and the core dynamic of transmutation in this letter. I suggest that we have underestimated how Seneca’s account of the bathroom engages with corporeality in Latin poetry via images of mighty Scipio Africanus (Elder or Younger) as clean-shaven, trend-setting Hellenophile. In pushing a reading of the double structure of Ep. 86 in terms of permeable contingencies as well as in terms of mirroring inversion, I highlight how the text toys satirically with the idea of “outing” Scipio from his bathroom closet within Seneca’s larger symbolic framework of philosophical and epistolary enclosure. The experience of Scipio’s villa, together with its bath and garden, is an overtly multisensual one, especially when read after and through the acoustic extravaganza of the baths in Ep. 56: we see, smell, and hear this place. Yet touch is there too, a barely hidden erotic impulse which surfaces in the warm hands of heroes (scires . . . manu sua temperasse, 86.10), in bodily contact with the earth (86.5, 86.17–20) and the embrace of elms by vines (tenent et complexae sunt non suas ulmos, 86.20). Touch suggests both a critical model of physical connection and a ready-made satirical commentary on Scipio as body. I set out to grapple here with the questions of how invasive or aggressive this

2. Henderson (2004) tends to dislocate 56 from 55, privileging the flip or relay from 55 to 86. The key visual link between bath and garden in Ep. 86 is therefore the subterranean, while erotic or disgusting bathing bodies are generally abstracted and abstractified as tortured rhetorical display. My reading emphasizes the extent to which “body as rhetoric” does not erase or trump rhetoric as body, or indeed bodies as bodies.
3. I have used the Oxford Classical Texts of Seneca throughout. All translations are my own.
4. Valerius Maximus is a key text in Seneca’s reception of the Scipio legend: note especially that at 2.10.2, the soldiers want to touch Scipio, unable to control their desire to make physical contact (laeti quod Scipionem contigissent). This desire to touch is precisely what the pleasure of seeing Scipio bathing in Sen. Ep. 86 conspicuously stops short of or projects elsewhere.

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touch of Seneca as guest appears to be, and of what it means to place Scipio’s bathhouse at the center of a letter that plays such a crucial role in Seneca’s investigation of being as dwelling.

In the letters’ relay of villas (12, 55, 86, 104, 123), Scipio’s is where a mass of Senecan ideas about confinement and transformation gets visualized and tested out. Here, Roman satire—from the muddy verse of raging Lucilius, who subliminally “partners” Seneca’s homonymous interlocutor, through Horace’s “conversations” on moderation, to Persius’ boiled-down secrets muttered into a dark ditch—will lead us into the endgame of Seneca’s point that walled enclosures are both our grim fate and our salvation, that claustrophobia breeds masses of creative genius, aka the way out. When we read Ep. 86 we understand that the baths are the ultimate icon for transformative enclosure in Seneca both because they enliven a dialectic between outside and inside (you “look out” from baths, peer into their seductive spaces, and the Roman public baths are microcosms, interiors open to all) and because they make vivid the potential for metamorphosis and amplification via water, and via the sounds or images that bounce off liquid surfaces, as well as man-made mirrors.

When Seneca adds baths and/or gardens to his villas, what he’s doing, in part, is writing the postscript to an Augustan narrative of poetic-imperial monumentality that climaxed with Ovidian immortality via metamorphosis (Ovid’s epic, completed in exile and rewritten from exile in Tristia 1.7, is walled into Seneca’s waterworks, as I discuss below). In monumental baths, whether the large-scale luxury public baths of “today,” or Scipio’s tomb-like shower stall, things flow and mix in confined space. The baths serve to pass the time, they’re taken at a specific time—or if not, it’s an issue. They’re where time passes. Related to this, in both a straightforward and a symbolic sense, is the idea that baths mark and stand for shifting urban fashions, for bodily change, as well as for the pace of Roman invention. As Seneca writes in Ep. 86.8, a bath complex might be “in” one week and “out” the next, as soon as another venue can boast more advanced technology, or some aesthetic novelty. Picturing Scipio Africanus at his bath, then, is already shorthand for contemplating change over time, for thinking about the shifting of perspectives, mores, literary trends, and language. To place the bathroom at the center of his description of Scipio’s villa is, for Seneca, to lodge ethics and philology at the heart of debates about Roman, Stoic identity.

**LIVING, DYING, AND SINGING IN THE BATHHOUSE**

The baths are also where Stoic praxis and self-examination get naked with literary experimentation in Seneca. Bathrooms make natural theaters for

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5. A narrative in which Hor. Carm. 4.8 is now highlighted (poetry, Ennius’ poetry, can pump up Scipio Africanus’ fame more than any marble or real-life evidence of victory over Carthage).

6. Proper Roman bathing was strictly an afternoon, pre-dinner affair. Characters in literature who eat or drink wine before bathing are corrupt, perverse, and bound to come to a sticky end (see, e.g., Sen. Ep. 122.6; Pers. 3; and also Suet. Ner. 27; Juv. 1.142; Marcus Aurelius Meditations 1.16). Compare Seneca’s correction of Virgil’s “overly poetic” timing at 86.16. On the letter as time-specific, time-vulnerable (will precepts sent now be still valid when the letter arrives?) and as marking time, see especially Ep. 12, 22.13, 58.37, 71.1. Long (2009, 30) calls Seneca’s preoccupation with the flow of time in the letters “the most striking feature of Seneca’s reflections on selfhood.”
oratorical or poetic composition and performance, as Ep. 56 puts on display. Horace complains of the echoing din of recitation in the baths at Sat. 1.4.74–78, inspiring Seneca’s complaint at Ep. 56.2 about the man who loves to hear his own voice in the baths. According to Suetonius, Augustus liked to write epigrams at bath-time, while Martial is hounded into the baths by the poet Ligurinus in Epigrams 3.44, and comments in 3.25 that Sabineius’ speeches are so frigid they could chill the baths of Nero. In Petronius, the echoey bathroom inspires Trimalchio to “open his drunken gob” and to “massacre Menecrates’ tune” (Sat. 73), and Horace writes in the Ars Poetica (298) of how “real” poets should “haunt lonely places and shun the baths.” For Seneca, the baths and attitudes to them are barometers of Roman morality generally, but more specifically of the Stoic student’s progress in dealing with the metropolis, with the anxiety of being confined to a physical body and to mortal existence. In short, the enclosure of the bathhouse in Seneca will always open up interrogation of being as dwelling. In the highly satirical Ep. 56, the noisy bathhouse below Seneca’s apartment presents the ultimate challenge in proving Stoic self-containment—a test the would-be sapiens comically fails. That kind of baths is better avoided, but the point is always that the literary bathhouse—which has even more opportunity to exploit aural-visual amplification and reflection—is always multivalent, an ideological and poetic quagmire. Here again, the idea of baths as fashion-conscious, continually updated establishments, undergirds the notion of a layered, polygeneric history of literature, a bodified palimpsest “washed” clean enough, then overwritten.

Ep. 56, as I discuss elsewhere, is one of Seneca’s densest compositions, a text in which sensory overload is both the topic in hand and the dramatized effect of the letter itself.6 Senecan baths are fleshy, textually lush.6 We remember especially Ep. 100.6, where Seneca compares overwritten style to houses with advanced plumbing and too much marble. The passage encourages readers to view texts architecturally, and to read architectural structures (especially marble-clad baths, with all the piping of air and water they require) as textual bodies. This image expands the ongoing basic metaphor in Seneca of body as house: see, for example, Ep. 52.5–6 and 65.17, and less explicitly, the first villa letter, Ep. 12, where Seneca struggles to come to terms with his aged body as reflected in his crumbling country pile.10

8. See Rimell forthcoming, chap. 4.
9. Just like the “fleshy” Ovidian letter, which tends to operate synecdochically, “embodying” its author. Seneca plays frequently on Ovidian epistolarity, especially the lover’s desire for presence despite being separated from the beloved by vast seas (Ep. 71.1). See also, e.g., Ep. 19.1, Ep. 49.1–2: Seneca posing as one of Ovid’s heroines.
10. See Ep. 52.5–6 (working on the foundations of one’s character as building) and 65.17 (the body is a “dark and gloomy house”); cf. Ep. 65.21 (the soul lives freely within the body as prison), with Ep. 30.2–4 (the ill or aged body as gaping hull and decrepit building; death as the house falling down), Ep. 49.9 (the siege mentality), and Ep. 120.14 (the body is an inn rather than a home). Also cf. Ep. 23.3 (happiness should be born inside of you, “in your house”). The idea, especially in the earlier letters (e.g., 14.11; 52.15) is that philosophy is a “sanctuary” which you can hold “inside” as a buffer against the torture of being enclosed in a body.
Being a Stoic befits a certain attitude to the baths in another sense, too: the wise man should be a “cold water enthusiast,” or even avoid bathing altogether. Indeed we might be tempted to read the outburst of *voluptas* in glimpsing Scipio’s bathroom in 86.4 as satirically produced by its “cold shower” repression in Senecan thinking on bodily care—not least in Ep. 51, where the fact that Scipio chose to retire to Liternum, not Baiae, sets the standard for avoiding or not succumbing to *voluptas*.

One of the most noticeable, perhaps counterintuitive, aspects to Scipio’s bath is that it implicitly used *hot water* (*non videbatur maioribus nostris caldum nisi obscurum*, “our ancestors thought you could only have a hot bath in the dark,” 86.4), even though the only warmth in the description at 86.10 is provided by great men’s hands. In *Ep.* 83.5 Seneca recounts that his life used to be punctuated by yearly ice-cold baths, undertaken as naturally as “reading, writing, or composing a speech.” Again bathing and literary activity are intertwined. At the time of writing *Ep.* 83, however, old age means Seneca’s once freezing plunges have become tepid dips (83.5). One’s bathing practices reveal one’s age, and they must change according to physical health and philosophical progress (which are ever conjoined in Seneca). In *Ep.* 107.2 the philosopher compares life itself to the experience of public bathing, where you never know what’s going to happen, or what’s going to hit you.

At the same time, we cannot think of Stoic “lifestyles,” especially under Nero, without thinking about bath suicides and murders. Even the most relaxing and innocent-looking of spa retreats is tinged with danger in Seneca. Persius’ third satire culminates in the sobering image of a man dying in his private tub after binge-eating and drinking. Bath suicide becomes a running theme in Tacitus *Annals* 15–16, of course, where Seneca’s bloody asphyxiation by steam is followed by the similar deaths of Vestinus, Lucan, Sextia, and Pollitta. But already in the *Epistles*, a key prelude to 86 is 77, a treatise on how to die a noble death, in which Seneca recalls the strategy pursued by Lucilius’ one-time friend Tullius Marcellinus: after three days of fasting, he had a tent erected around a bathtub in his bedroom in order to ensure steam could not escape, and let himself pass away slowly as he lay there in the hot

11. See *Ep.* 51.6, 53.3, 83.5.
12. *Ep.* 108.16 (“I’ve been running away from the bath my whole life”).
13. *Voluptas* is repeatedly mentioned as the thing to conquer in 51, the foundation letter for 86’s development of the legend of Scipio’s retirement/fortress mentality. See 51.5: *indurandus est animas et a blandimentis voluptatum procul abstrahendas*; 51.6: *debellandarum sunt in primis voluptates*; 51.8: *si voluptati cessero, cedere animus et ab aliis fugire esse*.
14. Is heat, implicitly? Is this code for telling readers they can never have an objective, neutral, desire-free perspective on the baths? The verb *conquerer* at 86.11 is a provocative one given the comment Seneca has just made about slaves being cooked alive in modern overheated baths. Baths are believed to *decoquer corpus* in a negative sense at *Ep.* 108.16. See also discussion of Persius, below, pp. 11–12. And compare *Ep.* 51, an important foundation stone for 86, esp. 51.6: *quid mihi cum utis calentibus stagent?* On the idea of water warmed only by human hands, also see *Ep.* 83.5, on Seneca’s own bathing habits (his “cold bath” is now just *parum caldas*; his favorite tank is warmed only by the sun). The image of hand-warmed water in *Ep.* 86 has the effect of making us imagine many bodies in one space, and of connecting that scene, too, with the quasi-erotic pleasure of looking.
15. E.g., *Ep.* 51.4 (praising Scipio’s choice of location for his villa): *non tantum corpori, sed etiam moribus salubrem locum eligere dehendam.*
water, which was “continually poured over him” (77.9). Seneca recalls this scene when he contrasts Scipio’s back-to-basics bathing with the luxury baths of first-century Rome (“the bather of old did not have water poured over him,” 86.9). Similarly, the modern bather is “drained weak” of sweat, if not blood, at 86.6, and these days bathwater is so hot, a condemned slave ought to be “bathed alive” (86.10). We might add that the poverty of Scipio’s bathroom always has a tragicomic edge after the fairly Tarantino-esque vignette at Ep. 70.20. It’s not just great men who can summon the strength to “break the bonds of human servitude” through suicide, Seneca remarks here: one German slave and trainee gladiator managed to sneak off to the loo—the only place he could “retire” and be alone, without a guard—where he promptly rammed a toilet sponge down his throat and suffocated. And in the next paragraph (70.22) it’s back to admiring the Scipiones. Seneca seems to suggest here that the bathroom is the ultimate retreat, a place where everyone can have a “private life” and “take control,” if only over his own ablutions and bodily functions. This idea returns in Ep. 86, as we appreciate the thrill of peeping at Scipio in his bathroom angulus, the dingy corner where he was never meant to be seen, and which becomes, in this letter, a kind of tomb.

ON REFLECTION

Bearing in mind the role of baths and bathing in representations of Neronian Rome, in Stoic texts, and in Seneca’s letters especially, I want to close in now on the dyadic structure of Ep. 86, and in particular the move from Scipio’s dark and narrow balneolum to the holes in the villa garden where Aegialus/Seneca plants his trees. Scipio’s greatness, the greatness of the name Scipio, is sewn into all parts of this letter from the beginning. Indeed, it’s telling that Seneca, the guest at this ancient house, whose name qua guest should be required, stated, interrogated, turns the spotlight on the host’s name instead. This may well prove to be his first act of violence. When he throws himself into the literary maelstrom of “The Scipio Legend,” Seneca pursues a quasi-militaristic, quasi-Scipionic strategy of encompassment. As he writes, his belief in the presence of the great man’s body is suffused with Scipio himself: SCrIBO . . . suSPICoR (86.1). This villa, and the tiny bathroom in it at the letter’s center, will take all within their grasp. And as Letters 51, 56, 83, and 86 make clear, however bijoux a Roman bathroom is, it always relies on immeasurable “outside” help, in the form of giant water tanks (86.4), the 3-D Roman roads that are soaring aqueducts (the Virgo, 83.5), great, historic rivers (the Tiber, 83.5), or, indeed, massive, always metaphoric, underground heat sources (the volcanic terrain of Sicily and Baiae, 51.1). Scipio is a

16. In this scene, the quasi-erotic pleasure of bathing in warm water and the Stoic’s pleasure in taking control of his life seem to merge (the experience was non sine quaedam voluptate, 77.9).
17. See Derrida 2000, 29: “the question of hospitality is thus also the question of the question; but by the same token the question of the subject and the name as hypothesis of descent.” Derrida investigates throughout this book the meaning of the double meaning of hostis in Latin (“host,” “enemy”).
19. The inspiration “contained” within the volcanoes of southern Italy erupts at Ep. 79, which discusses the poem Lucilius is writing on Mt. Aetna in Sicily, possibly the same unacknowledged poem entitled Aetna that has come down to us.
man, the greatest of maiores, who commanded “mighty armies” (magnos exercitus, 86.1), but Seneca admires his moderation (or magnitudinem animi, 86.3) even more (magis, 86.1), and it gives him massive pleasure (magna voluptas, 86.5) to imagine him in his bath. Great heroes in small spaces get huge reactions—much less impressive are the resplendent baths of today, which have “so much” of everything (quantum . . . quantum . . . quantum, 86.7), are accessorized with magnis orbibus (huge globes/mirrors, 86.6) and massive windows (86.8) and frequented by “how many” people (quantae, 86.11) who reckon bathing in the style of Scipio is barbaric. When attention moves to Aegialus’ garden, the branches and roots of large trees (magnarum arborum, 86.17) are cut down to size, the remaining stumps stamped down into holes, yet this produces a thicker, fresher growth. The final piece of advice concerns grandiScapiæ (86.21), “thick-stemmed” trees that refigure the mighty general with his huge armies in a flashback to the beginning of the letter.20 These trees are to be fed with aqua cisternina, water from the cisterna (86.21), reviving and varying the opening description of the fortress-villa at 86.4.

In accordance with this dynamic of expanding (within) circumscribed space, doubleness in this letter goes viral: all manner of pairings, comparisons, oppositions, with obligatory hendiadys and polyptoton, make the letter swell like Scipio himself, who is quoted as saying that he goes into exile because he has grown too big for Rome (exeo, si plus quam tibi expedit cr.), 86.2). Scipio is (the contrast between) two: Roman and African generals (Scipio and Hannibal, after Ep. 51), Italy and Carthage (so famously aligned, or opposed, at Aeneid 1.13), Rome and Liternum/“place of exile,”20 Baiae and Liternum. He is himself a hybrid—the true Roman who was also a Graecophile, who wrote his own memoirs in Greek and wore his toga Greek-style, a merciless general who never lost a battle but was the paragon of mercy. He is also the natural, “old-fashioned” partner to modern polymath Seneca, both major political figures in voluntary Roman “exile,” both fans of self-fortification and a back-to-basics bathing routine, despite possible differences of opinion over temperature. While Scipio lies buried, Seneca also “lies” (iacens, 86.1)—lying dead, hanging out, or even horizontal and dreaming of Scipio after Cicero’s Somnium?21 Scipio is pitted against and identified with Rome herself (aut Scipio Romae esse debebat aut Roma in libertate, 86.1). Likewise there are two kinds of baths, two temperatures, two different kinds of hot, two zeitgeists, two ways of replanting trees; there is then and now, sweat versus perfume (86.13), roof plus floor (86.5), washing and/not tanning (86.8), roasting and hanging about, roasting then stewing (86.11), filtered and muddy water (86.11), everyday as opposed to, or in conjunction with, weekly bathing (86.12). And, in addition, we have the pairs Buccillus and Rufillus, Rufillus and Gargonius, Buccillus and Gargonius (86.13), followed by teaching versus

20. We might note here that seasonal changes in trees become Horace’s central metaphor for the metamorphosis of live language and the constant invention of neologisms at Ars P. 60–61. The idea of trees as figuring human bodies (trunk with “limbs” and “head” of leaves), or the “growth” of families, nations, or cultural traditions is an ancient one: see Ferber 1999, 219–20. On trees, tree people, and family trees in Ovid and Virgil, see Govers 2005 and 2011, with Nisbet 1987 on tree-bodies in Senecean tragedy, and also Lowe 2011.

entertaining, and Senecan philosophy versus Virgilian poetry (86.16), beans and millet (86.16), treading and pressing (calcavit et pressit, 86.17), the cold and the wind (frigus . . . et ventum, 86.18), the vine after the olive (86.20), vines embracing elms (86.20). Finally, we are given a sense of the matey, flattering competition between Seneca and Aegialus, which is echoed in the rivalry between Seneca and Lucilius/the reader, and inevitably, also, between the “great exiles” Seneca and Scipio.

The final line of the letter reads, “I don’t think I’ll teach you anything more, in case, just as Aegialus did with me, I might be training you up to be my competitor [adversariam]” (86.21). It often seems in reading this letter as though the huge mirrors that feature in Seneca’s image of decadent modern baths at 86.6 are operating everywhere at a subliminal level, reproducing reflections and echoes which take us from the grounding reverberation of video . . . veneram . . . ait vilicus . . . villam veterem esse in Epistle 12.1 (this villa, like Scipio, “grew” in Seneca’s hands, crevit), to vidi villam (86.4) through olivetum . . . vidi (86.17) to vidi vitem . . . et vidi (86.20).

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It is in this ambiance that Scipio’s smallest room begins to transform itself. Less is more in more ways than one, as the first line of bathroom description spells out (Ep. 86.8):

In this bath of Scipio’s there are minimal chinks rather than windows [minimae sunt rimae magis quam fenestrae] cut out of the stone wall, so that they can let in light without weakening the fortifications.

Given Seneca’s “great pleasure” (magna voluptas, 86.4) at imagining Scipio rinsing in the dark, before the extravagant foray condemning luxurious baths placed inside the two hard walls of old-school bathing (in 86.6–7), those slits really do seem more than windows (magis quam fenestrae). It seems likely either that Trimalchio’s balneum angustum at Petronius Satyricon 73 parodies Scipio’s balneolum angustum (86.4), or that Seneca is spraying Scipio’s bathroom with a whiff of Petronian perversity, programming the pleasure of modern viewers’ distaste on peering into the museum. Read this way (and we can’t not also read it this way, whichever fiction came first), Scipio’s rimae look irresistibly Petronian, inviting us to become voyeurs, especially as we’ve just been instructed to think of the baths of freedmen (balnea libertinorum, 86.7). See, for example, Satyricon 26.2, when the gang watch Giton deflowering Pannychis through a vulval “slit” (rima) in the door made by Quartilla, a view suggested again at Satyricon 92.1, where Encolpius looks through a rima in the door. Yet Seneca has already set up (a) Scipio as the Stoic’s best

22. Petron. Sat. 73.2: balneum intravisimus, angustum scilicet et cisternae frigidariae simile, in quo Trimalchio rectus stabant. The possibility of Petronius’ text parodying Seneca’s, or at least Stoic writing generally, is distilled in the adjective rectus, meaning “upright” also in the moral sense. E.g., Sen. Ep. 34.4 (non est hucus animus in recto cuuis acta discordant), or Ep. 37.2 (recto tibi invictus modo miendi est); cf. the words of Vespasian while he died of a bowel complaint brought on by cold-water bathing, as reported by Suetonius Vesp. 24 (imperatorem ait statuem morte aportare).

23. There is always a frisson in extra-strong walls, after Ep. 43.3: “we think that the walls we surround ourselves by are designed not for security, but to enable us to sin more secretly.”
“internal eye” (25.6), with the aim of becoming “the kind of person in whose company you would not dare to sin.” The sign of “Scipio” is not just the ideal angel on your shoulder, then, he’s every would-be Stoic’s double. When we—via Seneca—get our kicks watching Scipio take a bath, there could be no more perverse, or apt, invocation of that critical gaze, both “internalized” and forgotten in the inviting interior of the balneolum.

Seneca writes another wave of pleasure into his fantasy at 86.10, as suddenly the bathroom is packed with bodies: “What a thrill [quam iuvat] it is to enter that dark bath, covered with its rough roof, knowing that in here a Cato, as aedile, or Fabius Maximus, or one of the Corneli, warmed the water with his own hands!” It turns out that the historical fascination, even erotic buzz, of imagining Scipio et al. at their toilette is well up to rivaling that of the luxury baths. Fashions change fast around here, although Seneca (a bit like one Scipio, the “first Roman to shave daily,” according to Pliny HN 7.59) is perhaps ahead of his time. “Get your pleasure here,” the satire seems to say, “not at Nero’s spa, that’s yesterday’s news!” Crowded with undressed heroes, it’s getting hot in there for sure. Though not, heaven forbid, as hot as modern baths whose description these lines lead right into at 86.10: nihil mihi videtur iam interesse, ardeat balineum an caleat (“it seems to me that these days there’s no difference between ‘the bath is on fire’ and ‘the bath is hot’ ”). Seneca’s technique of alternating “good” and “bad” baths, all within the context of over-excited imagining, the intrigue of Scipio’s archaic strangeness a couple of centuries hence, has the challenging, entertaining counter-effect of marrying associations, which will be the more blatant exercise at the end of the letter, when replanted vines thrive and embrace elms, in a textbook attraction of opposites (tenent et complexae sunt non suas ulmos, 86.20).

In the spirit of combination, redoubling, and augmentation to match Scipionic growth, Letter 86 brings back with a vengeance the spectacularity almost pushed out of the acoustic bathhouse in Ep. 56. Strengthened by the root-structure of Ep. 12 and 55, Seneca’s visit to Scipio’s villa+bath+garden is all about looking, and in Seneca especially, the more things are concealed, the more we want to look.24 The enclosed villa complex shaded by forest, its covered well, the tiny recess within the secessus with slits for windows—this property has the “wow” factor, especially when we compare it to, and read into it, the reflective spectacularity of the modern bathhouse. Yet scopophilia is not a replacement for, but an add-on to Letter 56’s sound effects, recalled at 86.7: quantum aquarum per gradus cum fragro labentum! (“What a mass of water falling, crashing, down the steps!”).25 Scipio’s bath is, or evokes, an assault on the senses. It’s time, in other words, to imagine the smells. Romans like Scipio only took a full bath weekly, so must have stunk of earth and sweat (86.12, cf. 51.6). As John Henderson notes, 86.12–13 plays on the superficial similarity between olim, “once upon a time” (a recurrent theme,
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They must have been disgusting alright.

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cf. at olim et pauca erant balnea, 86.9), and the verb olēre. The shock of how utterly filthy these ancient Romans were is captured in the gossip of Seneca’s imaginary interlocutor at 86.12: “liquet mihi inmundissimos fuisset,” quid putas illos olausse? (“they must have been disgusting alright.”) Can you imagine how much they reeked?, which itself revives the sibilance of bath noise in Ep. 56. This is where Seneca introduces Horace, and the nose of satire, into this already very busy, overheated bathroom. In one of the letter’s many contrasts, he explains how the modern equivalent to natural body odor, rinsed off in the bath but reappearing minutes afterward in the fields, is perfume—also short-lasting and (these days) needing to be reapplied two or three times a day (86.13). Whereas sweat builds up and must be rinsed off, perfume fades and must be reapplied: a mirroring inversion you can smell. As Horace informed us in his Satires, unguent is its own brand of disgusting, yet Seneca’s satire is even more intense, his “nose” even bigger. He’ll raise Horace’s Rufillus to a Buccillus, and show how the updated version (Buccillus) makes his Horatian model almost unperfumed by comparison, to the extent that Buccillus would “take the place” of offensively natural-smelling Gargonius in Horace’s account (Ep. 86.13):

What does Horatius Flaccum say when he wants to describe a ponce notorious for his excess primping?

Buccillus smells of perfume [pastillos Buccillus olet].

Give me a Buccillus these days; he’d smell of goat, taking the place of Gargonius, whom Horace contrasted with Buccillus in that same passage. It’s not enough to smear on unguent now, unless you also reapply it two or three times a day, lest it evaporate from the body. But why should a man glory in a perfume that is not his own?

As critics have discussed, in this passage Seneca almost quotes Horace Satire 1.2.27, which is itself requested at Satire 1.4.92. Seneca writes pastillos Rufillus olet, not pastillos Buccillus olet, “correcting” and “improving” the original satire by making its victim more bodily (that is, Buccillus evokes bucca, the mouth, where aromatic lozenges were sucked). He even magics up the sound of sucking with all those lingual ls, while at the same time echoing illos olausse in Seneca’s previous comment. Horace follows his antithesis at Satire 1.2.27 with the observation that there is “no middle way” in corrupt modern life (nil medium est, 1.2.28), against which he positions his own moderation. Seneca, however, shows how temporospatial relation (the condition of life, especially at the baths) will always disturb perfectly rigid opposition, to the extent that two opposites can come to resemble each other, and hierarchies can shift, even reverse. In short, Buccillus is the new Rufillus is the new Gargonius.

The question we are nudged to ponder is: how far, by analogy, and how fast, can the decadent baths of today become the rustic museum pieces of tomorrow, and, more interestingly, vice versa? In addition: how do (perfumed) baths begin to merge into (manure-reeking) country gardens in the time it takes to read and reread this letter? And how to keep a firm hold on “the good” when

26. The Loeb volume also prints olim instead of aliquis at 86.12, after Hense’s conjecture.
fashion (i.e., time) alters the ethical and cultural register of behaviors? How far does the body both force and delimit philosophical progress as it is defined in Seneca’s texts? Does Seneca’s voluptas in response to Scipio’s hole in Ep. 86 constitute a philosophical failure to match his comic inadequacy in the bathhouse of 56? Does it bait readers with something we are meant to avoid? It would seem so after Ep. 51, which, as I discussed in section 1, repeats the messages “avoid all voluptas” and “Scipio’s Liternum is not Baiae is not pleasure.” Clearly, in the light of 51 and 56, Ep. 86 really ups the ante. It might be possible in Ep. 56 to block our ears to the off-notes of tricky philosophy in written letters, but how easy is it not to imagine smells when they are so evocatively described? How would one go about “closing one’s nose” to this stinky, perfumed letter? It’s a nightmare for Lucilius (and we can almost hear Seneca sniggering) to try to distinguish between bad unguent and the kind of philosophical perfume which should properly rub off on him, especially after Ep. 108.4, where Seneca compares philosophy to a perfume shop (you only have to linger there for a bit, and you’ll carry with you the odorem loci).

The other point, of course, is that the baths as literary locus allow both a layering of Roman traditions and a fluid messing with tradition within bodily, watery, ephemeral space. Letter 51 was then, remember, this is now. And in between is Ep. 83, admitting that the fancy Greek label from 53.3, psychrolutes (“cold water bather” 83.5), doesn’t quite apply any more. Perfume and sweat are opposed yet parallel: they both figure scent through evaporation, liquid evanescence. Scipio’s bath is also the spot in Letter 86 where topography is shown to penetrate everything—befitting the mentality of displaced exile. This letter is about being transported to one place (in hoc angulo, 86.5; in hoc balneo, 86.8), yet the story of Scipio began when he “gave way to laws” (locum dedit legibus, 86.3) and withdrew to Liternum, and now hoc loco pinpoints a place in a conversation (hoc loco dicet aliquis, 86.12), one smell “taking the place” of another over time (Gargonii loco esset, 86.13). Time can be concretized as space, Seneca seems to be saying, yet equally, space can be temporalized. Language also evolves in time, so that literal evolves into metaphorical usage. This is, to be exact, what literary bathhouse fashion puts on display.

FROM SLITS TO HOLES: THE STORY OF SATIRE

In the previous section, I suggested some ways in which we might see the baths in this letter as a locus for reflecting on the history of Roman satire. Between Horace and Petronius, however, there is more: 86.11 takes us back to Roman satiric roots by alluding to (Horatian bitching about) the “muddy waters” of Lucilius, Republican author of thirty books of satires who took Scipio Aemilianus, the grandson by adoption of our Scipio, as his patron. Seneca’s gossiping interlocutors are horrified at the thought that Scipio bathed in unfiltered rainwater that was often muddy, paene lutulentia, a first nod toward Horace’s Satire 1.4, at line 11: cum fluertet lutulentus, erat quod tollere velles (“in his muddy flow of words, there was stuff you would like to remove”).

28. Henderson (2004, 156) also discusses this.
Via Horace, then, Seneca inserts a sardonic subcommentary on his own shameless strategy of clogging up Scipio’s simple bathroom. If we pick up the other hints and whiffs of Roman satiric *sermones*, we might even start seeing Scipio’s damp hovel sketched over Persius’ dark study, and Scipio himself pre-satirized via Persius as the “swollen” epic figure who keeps on growing. At first, Persius, Seneca’s contemporary and fellow Stoic who died in 62, is no more than a very distant odor: the corrupt “stewing alive” of modern bath-houses (*docoquebatur et expectabat ut in balneo concoqueret, 86.11*) might just allude to Persius’ boiled-down concoctions (*si aliquid decoctius audis, Persius Sat. 1.125*). All the more apt, perhaps, given that in the fascinating first letter of Seneca’s eleventh book of *Epistles*, 84, *concoquere* is the chosen metaphor for reading as digestion, analogous to the making of honey (*concoquamus illa, 84.7*)

29. All the more apt, perhaps, given that in the fascinating first letter of Seneca’s eleventh book of *Epistles*, 84, *concoquere* is the chosen metaphor for reading as digestion, analogous to the making of honey (*concoquamus illa, 84.7*).

30. *Sat. 1.119*. As Andrea Cucchiarelli points out, the *scrobis* (“hole”), together with the motif of decoction, constitute “the two most decisive symbols for the kind of satire Persius writes.”


34. And it is through Persius’ bitter, bitten-down, visually flashy poetry that we really begin to get our hands dirty with Seneca’s subterranean imagery. In the end it is the smell of fresh Roman satire that brings garden into bathroom most evocatively, and vice versa. Scipio is one of the SPurCIOres (86.13). He showers in his bathroom hole (with Persius’ window slits) to wash off the dirt from digging in his garden. While Scipio’s dirty torso is cramped inside the dark, narrow bathroom, the tree trunk is packed into a shitty ditch for optimal regrowth. And Scipio uses the same rainwater for bathing that is great for the thick-stemmed trees (grandISCaPiae, 86.21). When Seneca returns (revertar) to the olive grove in 86.17, the *oli-vetum* carrying over the pong (*oluisse*) that a dip in muddy water
won’t wash off, we discover that managing the garden involves coating tree stumps with manure and stamping them into holes (86.17):

hoc fimo tinctum in scrobem demisis, deinde terram non adgesit tantum, sed calcavit et pressit.

It’s stinky work, dealing with the angry ghosts of satire from Lucilius to Persius. But then again, Scipio knew that his burial was a humble, almost demeaning act:32 as Lucretius writes at De rerum natura 3.1034–35, referring to the horror Carthaginius taken up by Seneca in Ep. 86, Scipio “gave his bones to the earth like the lowliest of slaves.”

TREE SURGERY: SHAVING AND DISMEMBERMENT

What is clear is that Seneca’s garden scene is a visually violent one, evocative of brutal, Neronian poetry-editing (all those cut-off feet, all that careful placement). The amputation of branches and roots in this passage is a painful version of the “pleasurable” imagined scene of Scipio bathing—a body glimpsed in bits, sliced into flashes through narrow windows, the vision of a true Roman just washing arms and legs (brachia et crura, 86.12) and leaving the trunk covered in shit. Dirty tree stumps are suggestively bodily after the muddy bath scene in Ep. 86, especially when we recognize that Seneca employs a range of conventions to hint at the corporeality of trees and the poetics of their care.33 The precision measurements of arboriculture—branches chopped off to one foot, trunk no more than three or four feet off the ground—suggest well-developed metaphors of metrical as human feet. Aegialus’ tree is measured in feet, and when its roots are cropped, only the “head part” is left. This is thrust, manure-smeared, into a dark hole that transforms the space of Scipio’s dark, narrow, overdetermined bath, and which like his fortress+bath, provides protection from the cold and the wind (86.18). The implicit comparison of people to trees here is a familiar one in Roman literature, particularly epic.34 The trope of warrior as tree is most striking, perhaps, in Lucan Bellum civile 1.135–42, where Pompey is compared to an aged oak, laden with trophies, and towering frugiferus... sublimis in agro. Yet the roots he clings on by have lost their strength and his branches are bare of leaves around a mighty trunk. Lucan, Seneca’s nephew, probably published the first three books of his epic

32. How low can Scipio go, exactly? What does it mean for his villa to be tended by Aegialus, who Pliny tells us was the son of a former slave (NH 14.49)? See discussion in Henderson 2004, 180–63. Is this (for the enlightened, unprejudiced Stoic reader) just what time does? (See, e.g., Ep. 44.4–5, quis est generousus?) Edwards (2009) discusses in detail the creative contradictions of Senecan thinking on slavery.

33. On trans-plantation as always suggesting the trans-ference required by metaphor, see Henderson 2004, 139–57, with Bartsch 2009. On allegorical trees here, also see Ker 2009, 351; Gagliardi 1978; Mazzoli 1970, 221–22. The image takes its cue from Ep. 12.2, where Seneca appears to see his own aged body in the gnarled forms of ancient plane trees.

34. Conversely, anthropomorphized trees are also a feature of, e.g., Ovid Met. 10.90–105, when trees crowd round to listen to Orpheus’ song; cf. Status Theb. 6.98–106; Virgil Cules 281–82; silvae are sensitive to (pastoral) song, and their destruction stands for the destruction of nature’s depths, and for the ravages of civil war. Trees are extracts of philosophical writing in the textual whole of the forest at Sen. Ep. 33.1. Also see Quint. Inst. 10.1.88 (revere Ennius like you revere sacred groves). On the metaphors of silvae (which are contained within Scipio’s compound at 86.4) as “rough drafts,” or poetic collections, see Hinds (1998, 14), and most recently Wray (2007) and Butler (2011, 79).
in 60 C.E., and died by forced suicide in the same year (65) Seneca himself met the same fate. Tacitus implies, in the shift from *Annals* 15.69 (the hot-bath killing of Vestinus) to 15.70 (the bleeding-out of Lucan) that Lucan also suffered the standard slit-veins-in-steaming-bath death. But as well as “dying together,” Lucan and Seneca are also writing side by side in the early sixties. While Seneca was penning his letters (including the cluster concerning Baiae and the surrounding zone), Lucan was also apparently at work on his own *Epistulae ex Campania*, now lost. We might wonder how much of Seneca’s own “family tree” is written, ever so faintly, into this passage. As well as to what extent this entire scene is a self-interested abrogation of family trees in favor of “rootless” exile.

The image of huge trunk with branches lopped off, and also the custom of hanging spoils on trees, are reminiscent too of *Aeneid* 10.423 (Pallas’ attack on Halaesus, the prayer that Tiber’s oak might carry his spoils), and of the beginning of *Aeneid* 11, where the *ingentem quercum*, with its *decisis ramis* (11.5; cf. *Ep.* 86.17, *circumcisis ramis*), figures Mezentius’ mutilated body, and displays his armor dripping with blood. The idea in *Ep.* 86.17 that when the roots are cropped, what is left is “just a head” (*relictus tantum capite ipso*) hints perhaps at decapitation, the fate of great leaders like Pompey. Or rather, it suggests a perverse version of beheading whereby only the head is left after the limbs have been cut off. Does the connection between grim, hot bath in the site of exile’s “going out,” and the cutting of aged arboREAL bodies, carry with it traces of the custom of Stoic-Neronian bath-death? Is Seneca engineering the poetics of Scipio’s Ovidian transformation through the cultivation of his near-immortal trees, or is he (even at the same time) hinting at a radical, painfully Stoic updating of Scipio’s demise, a violent, Neronian “rebirth” that is contingent on cocky trespass, on denuding the vulnerability of this “great man,” who must be sliced up, even humiliated, to survive? *Radit* in Latin (86.18), we might remember, means “he shaves” (or “scrapes”), but also “he hurts” and “he offends.” It is used by Persius in *Satire* 1.107–8 to describe the abrasive action of satire (*sed quid opus teneras mordacis radere vero l auriculas?* “why scrape tender little ears with the biting truth?”), and appears frequently in descriptions of expensively produced, neo-Callimachean books, whose covers have been “shaved” or “smoothed.” The cut, shaved olive tree—short-rooted, then feeble-rooted—may “revive” to produce more fruit, in sharp contrast to Pompey’s weak-rootedness, which signals the end of his military might in Lucan 1. At the same time, however, it is hard to avoid the gendered implications of Seneca’s-Aegialus’ gardening. That is to say, Scipio’s trees (if not buried Scipio himself) suffer multiple amputations in order to maximize their quasi-female fertility, rendering them in dire need of patriarchal care as they prepare for rebirth. We might also remember that

35. The implicit analogy between wounded tree and mauled human body here reminds us of the more literal metamorphosis of Trojan into tree at *Aen.* 3.24–30, when the first tree Aeneas pulls up by the roots starts dripping black blood, and the voice of Polydorus groans out from the mound, begging him to leave his spear-studded body alone. On tree-violation in the *Aeneid*, see Thomas 1988, with Gowers 2011 and Lowe 2011.
37. E.g., Ovid *Pont.* 2.4.17; Martial 4.10.1 (after Catullus 1.1–2: *cui dono lepidum novum libellum / arido modo punice expeditum?*).
earlier in the letters, treating Lucilius like a tree flaunts the power play between Stoic teacher and pupil/subject: 38 the “tending” of Lucilius’ growing branches appears as a “soft” version of Seneca’s more drastic image of the philosopher as surgeon operating on a sick man, which might seem equally applicable here in Ep. 86. 39

Certainly, if we pursue the analogy between tree and man to any extent at all, what Seneca seems to place at stake is Scipio’s bodily integrity and hence masculinity—in synthesis, the vulnerability of his body-as-fama. What is particularly striking about the practice of “shaving” roots (rapum . . . radit, 86.18) from the tree bulb of the manly olive tree (leaving “just the head,” 86.17) is that the most famous ancient images we think we have of Scipio Africanus—for example the bronze bust excavated in the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum in 1752, now at the National Archaeological Museum in Naples—depict him with no beard and a shaven head. 40 We are reminded that Pliny grants Scipio Africanus the Younger (our Scipio’s adopted grandson, who finally razed Carthage to the ground to end the third Punic War), the honor of having introduced regular shaving to Rome (Pliny HN 7.59). 41 As one of the shaven-headed images, a basalt bust, was found at Liternum in the sixteenth century, it has often been assumed that it represents the original owner of the villa, and that Scipio the Elder was actually the “first Roman to shave daily,” in the style of Alexander the Great. 42 Yet as Johann Winckelmann pointed out, the younger Scipio, who was his grandfather’s double and direct heir in so many ways, presumably inherited the villa, and could have left this image of himself behind. 43 It arguably would be more interesting if Seneca was subtly conjuring up Scipio’s grandson, also of Africanus fame, in his implicit discussion of inheritance and “family trees,” but either way: are we to envisage a shaved head, trimmed to Scipionic standards, in the image of Ep. 86.17–18? Is Seneca making over Scipio(+Scipio?) with a haircut? Or in other words, is the shaving of the head-like tree bulb precisely what identifies

38. At Ep. 34.1, Seneca is cultivating Lucilius’ mind like a farmer who takes pleasure (delectat) in his tree growing and bearing fruit. Cf. Ep. 38.2 (words should be scattered like seed, the object is to foster growth). Also cf. ad Marcianum 16.7 (where the loss of trees is compared to a mother’s loss of a child; replanting heals the pain of loss).

39. On the Stoic philosopher as surgeon (no pain, no gain), see Ep. 52.9–10. Seneca plays doctor to patient Lucilius in, e.g., Ep. 15, Ep. 78, Ep. 94, and elsewhere in his philosophical works the metaphor is developed at, e.g., Trag. 1.2, 2.1; de Brev. Vit. 4.5; Helv. 1.1.

40. The image preserved of Africanus the Elder on the gold signet ring from Capua (late third or early second century B.C.E.) has cropped hair but is clean-shaven. So is the image believed to be a portrait of the same man on a silver coin from Carthago Nova, now in the Royal Collection of Coins and Medals in the National Museum, Copenhagen.

41. Romans apparently wore beards before the Hellenistic period, from which time on (until Hadrian brought beards back into fashion) facial hair is often deemed a sign of squalor or primitiveness in our texts. See also Livy 5.41; Cic. Cael. 14; Varro Rust. 2.11; Juv. 5.30.

42. E.g., Peterkin (2001, 63) assumes this, as does Gabriel (2008).

43. Winckelmann (now translated by Mattusch 2011, 187–88) suggested here and elsewhere that all the presumed heads of Scipio, recognizable for their hairlessness, are portraits of the younger Scipio rather than the Elder. Later scholars have argued convincingly that the so-called Scipio-type portraits/busts may represent many different individuals, from freedmen who shaved their heads on manumission, to priests of Isis. This does not change the likelihood of the bald-headed bust found at Liternum representing either Africanus the Elder or Younger, and the sheer number of Scipio-type representations would seem to indicate a trend, at least in art.
the garden scene of Ep. 86 as an exercise in reviving Scipio, in treating him as a live, potentially satiric body?

Yet this can never be straightforward lampooning, the text evinces, because Seneca has set himself up to always see himself in the mirror of the villa and of Scipio in exile. One of the conclusions to be drawn from the advanced specular games in 86, which have their complex build-up through the Epistles, is that Seneca’s self-lionization through the model of Scipionic greatness-in-retreat is made to become inseparable from anxieties about time, death, and fame which rise to the surface throughout the letters. We are reminded that of all Seneca’s philosophical works this is the text that is most intimate, via the tropes of “amateur,” “quotidian” epistolarity, with the struggles of the proficiens and the painful challenge of dealing with time. The story Ep. 86 tells makes thinking about Scipio in retreat indivisible from reflection on Seneca’s own political “exile.”

To recap then: Scipio (or Scipio-Scipio, Scipio-Seneca, Scipio-Lucilius) is akin to the majestic, long-lived, self-renewing olive, it would seem. He is not the aging oak of Lucan’s soon-to-be-headless Pompey, but a shaven ball (86.18). From the “naked material” remaining (materia . . . nudata), new roots “come out” (radices exunt novae, 86.18). We know by the time we get to this letter what “going out” verbs signify in Seneca: Ep. 86 began with Scipio’s cry “exter” (“I go into exile”), and elsewhere Seneca uses the verb to describe the “going out” of death (the soul’s escape from the enclosure of the body) in parallel to the “exit” of retirement. Exile, especially after Ovid, is a kind of death, a “going out” from regular, Roman life, but Seneca’s post-Ovidian bathroom-olive grove turns exile/death around into rebirth. Baths are where you get naked, wash, and (in Scipio’s case) shave: he emerges a new man in his fortress of exile, having begun a trend that will radically change the appearance of the average Roman. As the first public figure to cultivate smooth cheeks as the masculine norm (according to urban myth, at least), Seneca’s Scipio is made over in the temporospatial shift from bathroom to garden that is marked in the layering, fading, and reappraisal of dirty smells.

When the delicate roots regrow from the shaved head-stump, the “packing process” (pisatio, 86.18) will protect them from the cold and the wind, and ensure that the trunk is not shaken about too much. This is essential, Seneca adds, because the roots are barely clinging (haerentia) to the soil and even a gentle movement could uproot them (86.18). First of all, it’s interesting that the imperative to not shake is reminiscent of Seneca’s avuncular warning to beginner-Lucilius in the early letters not to shake himself up. Compare Ep. 84, the first letter of Book 11, where Seneca writes about how he has been shaken up by traveling, and about how useful this is for physical and intellectual well-being. As I noted above, Seneca/Aegialus treats young trees like vulnerable trainee philosophers lagging far behind the goal of ironclad masculinity. Secondly, the use of the present participle haerentia in the

44. Launching from Letters 12, 51, 55, and 56 in particular, as well as from 68 on retirement.
45. See especially Ep. 22.5: censeo aut ex istu vita tibi aut e vita exeundum. Seneca begins Ep. 86 by emphasizing his conviction that Scipio has escaped, or “returned” in caelum.
46. Yet in Ep. 59.14 the wise man always remains inconstans (“unshaken”).
context of implicitly anthropomorphized trees again recalls the portrait of aging Pompey in Lucan Book 1, who “clings” with “roots no longer strong” (*nec iam validis radicibus haerens*, 1.138), already predicting his defeat and bodily mutilation.

We might also spy here one of the most gruesome of Ovidian transformations. Whereas Letter 56 exploited *Metamorphoses* 3 for the narcissistic seductions and reflections of water, Ep. 86 gives us just a glimpse of Pentheus’ dismemberment at the end of the same book, his arms torn off like autumn leaves barely clinging to their branches. The repulsive move from body to tree must be made, largely, by Ovid’s implicated reader, who “sees” those autumnal colors (not explicitly revealed by the text) as a flash of red-yellow gore (*Met.* 3.729–31):

> non citius frondes autumni frigore tactas
> iamque male haerentes alta rapit arbor e ventus,
> quam sunt membra viri manibus dir epta nefandis.

The speed at which foul hands tore off his human limbs
outdid the wind that whipped off leaves, fragile, touched by
autumn cold and barely clinging to the tree tops.

Once we pursue the notion of tree surgery as a transplantation of Scipio’s body in the bathhouse, rather than a curious adjunct to it, the corporeality of trees and the “healing” torture those bodies undergo become hard to ignore. Much has been written on the post-Ovidian and perhaps also amphitheater-inspired obsession with dismemberment in Seneca and in other Neronian authors, as well as on how bodily mutilation is figured poetically,47 and comes to figure civil war, societal breakdown, the “beheading” of power.48 Dismemberment is also Seneca’s metaphor in the prose works for being at the mercy of pleasures and other vices (e.g., Ep. 51, the prequel to 86: “both ambition and anger will want to have the same control over me as pleasure, and I shall be torn apart *[distrahar]*, or indeed pulled to pieces *[discerpar]*, among all these feelings,” 51.8). It may also be important to remember that Ovid in *Tristia* 2.105–6 famously identified the torture of exile with the torments of Actaeon, who, like his “other” Pentheus, was torn apart limb from limb by his own dogs (or Bacchic “bitches”) in the third book of an epic itself “broken off” by exile (*Tr.* 1.7.14). It would seem difficult entirely to excise tragic passion and beastly, lustful tearings from Seneca’s lesson in regrowth. Scipio is glimpsed by spoilt time-travelers naked in his bath and covered in dirt, sliced into snapshots of limbs and torso: ultimately, we might suspect, the bathroom that can hold so much is designed to engineer Seneca’s irreverent training up, and to cut old Scipio(nes) down to size. Hence: all that competition, thinking in twos, seeing selves in mirrors, running neck to neck and in sequence—but just one winner? Is the exiled Roman (after Ovid) doomed to be misrepresented as dismembered? Ultimately the test is that we decide

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how violent and how satirical this passage is, how far Seneca protects and “grooms” Scipionic trees, and how far he gets the knives out in a controlled, dramatic attack, or display of self-harm.

THE ROUGH AND THE SMOOTH

Yet there is “another way of replanting” trees, Seneca writes in 86.19: *alter ponendi modus hic fuit* (here the vocabulary does double duty as rhetorical and poetic posturing).49 The second technique involves not getting rid of the branches and roots and tending what is left, but taking young cuttings and replanting them. These grow “a little more slowly,” but since the new trees spring up from tender branches, there is “no roughness or ugliness/sadness about them” (*nihil habent in se abhorridum aut triste*, 86.19). The “other way of looking at it,” then, is that the *horror Carthaginis* will also leave Seneca’s salon with absolutely “no roughness or ugliness” about him. In other words, the lingering joke may lurk in a satiric rewriting (and hilarious “correction”) of *horror Carthaginis* as not so much the *terror*, but “the wild roughness” of Carthage.50 In this way, Ennian “bristling” is read through the trope of “hairy” epic.51 The equivocation of *horror Carthaginis* draws much, potentially, from the ancient analogy between bristling hair and bristling leaves or trees. In the spirit of *Ep.* 86’s multimedia drive, *horror* (when imagined in the context of trees) is not just a feeling but a sound (see, e.g., Lucan 3.409–10, or Seneca *Oedipus* 574–76). *Horror* is commonly used in literary Latin to describe hair standing stiffly, or bristling, and by extension to refer to the “hair” of trees, the leaves that bush around “heads” of trees;52 it describes terror, a cause of terror, and roughness of appearance, but is also applied to “uncouth” literary style, and conveys “discordant” sound or even severity of manner.53 Once he’s been spruced up, replanted, and rewritten by Seneca in this neat and intricately patterned letter, there will be nothing shaggy, no traces of wild Lucilian satire or primitive Ennian epic left in *this* Scipio. Scipio (and/or Scipio) might have been a terror but he was *always* clean-shaven, a trendsetter ahead of his time. Now, finally, he gets a good, modern wash. Like the transplanted olive “clothed” in healthy regrowth (*vestitetur*, 86.18), he’s dressed to impress. As Matthew Leigh summarizes, the dominant metaphor of early Latin literature in imperial Rome is the barbershop, to be succeeded by the top-end

49. For *pono* referring to expression in speech or writing, see, e.g., Cic. *De or. 2.271*, 3.206; Varro *Ling. 7.5*; *Rhet. Her. 4.2*; Pers. 1.86. For *modus* referring to meter, rhythm, or poetry generally, see, e.g., Cic. *Orat. 193*; Hor. *Sat. 1.4.58*; Prop. 3.9.44; Ov. *Tr. 2.220*; Hor. *Carm. 2.1.20*; Stat. *Silv. 2.2.42*. Also *pressus* (86.17); cf. *Ep. 59* on Lucilius’ spare written style (*pressa sunt omnia*).

50. *Now* not just *so modern*, but even, if revived, highly dodgy: see Seneca’s warning to Lucilius at *Ep.* 5.2 (“Rough presentation, an unshaved head, a slovenly beard, dislike of silver, sleeping on the floor, and any other perverted forms of self-display, are to be avoided”).

51. The label *horror Carthaginis* is, as far as we can tell, inherited by Seneca from Ennius through Lucretius (3.1034–35): for a full account, taking into account all the missing texts on Scipio, see Henderson 2004, 102–3. Also see Freudenburg 2001, 82–92.

52. E.g., (the “hair” of trees) Catullus 4.12; Virg. *Aen. 2.629*; Hor. *Carm. 4.7.2*, 4.3.10–11; cf. *Carm. 3.19.25* (with Oliensis 2002, 106); Prop. 3.16.28; Ov. *Am. 1.7.34*; Stat. *Silv. 3.3.98* (the horror of hair) Lucr. 3.154; Virg. *Aen. 12.868*; Val. *Fl. 1.229*; Stat. *Silv. 2.6.43*; Quint. *Inst. 11.3.160*. Also Pliny *NH* 17.37.284 on trees, like humans, needing barbers and manicurists. For discussion, see Lowe 2011.

53. For examples of all of these uses, see the lengthy OLD entry.
salons of neoteric, neo-Callimachean verse, fed into the Roman epic tradition via Ovid’s braided Metamorphoses.54 This makes smooth-chinned Scipio, on the cusp between horror and levitas, between tough-as-nails Roman and cultivated blue-blood Hellenophile, into the perfect exemplum through which to fashion a cosmetic synthesis and satiric remake of fleshy Latin literature. Seneca achieves this by working into his letter the most Roman and bodily of genres (satire from Lucilius through Horace to Petronius and Persius), interwoven with hands-on Roman writing on agriculture.55

The hair jokes, incidentally, continue or are mirrored in the next, final section of Ep. 86 on vines. Little wonder, since Seneca’s own justification of writers’ use of metaphor in Ep. 59.6 is phrased as the need to provide props (adminicula, literally “the stakes which hold up young vines”) to our “stupidity.”56 To transplant an aged vine, Seneca instructs, you should gather together all their capillamenta (“fibers,” but also “hairs,” 86.20). No more shaving, then, but a neat spreading out of the rambling tresses, so that they may begin to take root even from the body (ut etiam ex corpore radicescat, 86.20).57 We’ve not left hairy epic and tragedy behind at all, then, just paired them with a cleaner, tighter, more up-to-date aesthetic: the wild, loose, quasi-tragic hair of the feminine vine is arguably tamed here, turned elegiac.58 The “liberality” (previously of wild, witchy hair) will consist now in the increased freedom (liberalius) with which the vine is “bestrewn” or “bedded” (sternenda vitis). The gerundive of the verb sterno suggests the stem being “covered” as if with a blanket, but also the idea of the female “body” of the vine being “laid down” to aid regeneration, or metaphorically, reproduction. Pairing is all so elegiac, too: in the final lines the vines “embrace elms which are not their own,” like naughty puellae stealing other women’s husbands.

Conclusions

Epistle 86, I’ve proposed, moves to make mutability inseparable from muti- lation. The transformation of Scipio within the metamorphic hot spot of the bathroom, inside the shitty holes of Seneca’s literary-critical villa garden, gives the lie to his fortress of identity, to dwelling as oneness, to monumental- ity as fixity, and to the immutability of fama.59 There are chinks (rimae) in

54. Leigh 2000, 4; e.g., see Prop. 4.1.61 and Ov. Tr. 2.259 on shaggy, unkempt Emnius and Cic. Orat. 152 on Cato the Elder’s rough and hairy Latin (imitations of Cato’s vocabulary will become horridus, says Quintilian at Ins. 2.5.21); cf. Hor. Ep. 2.1.157 (the native Italian meter, the “Saturnian measure” is horridus). The hairdressing metaphor is taken up by Seneca himself at Ep. 115: see esp. 115.2, where he argues that we should be as suspicious of a very polished literary style (e.g., oratio . . . circumtonsa) as we are of young men barba et coma nitidos.


57. The corpus is text is body: see, e.g., Epictetus in Discourse 2.14, “The skill of expression and arranging words, if it really is a skill, does nothing more than to dress up and organize words on a given topic, the way a hairdresser arranges hair.”

58. In the light of Oliensis’ intricate reading of tied up and loose hair in Horace’s Odes (2002), we might be tempted to see Seneca’s gathering up of capillamenta as a (quasi-)clausal gesture. Certainly, there is a dramatic sense of truncation at the end of Ep. 86. The highly suggestive grandiscapiae at 86.21 get only a brief sentence, after which Seneca stops in his tracks, refusing to tell Lucilius any more (plura te docere non cogito). Tree hair is tied up, before being cut off.

59. See Derrida’s discussion in 2000 of ipseity as “at home-ness.”
Scipio’s armor and in the walls of his shower stall, chinks we are encouraged to look through. I have been suggesting that the bathhouse and garden are privileged locations for articulating this vulnerability, precisely because their bodiliness, the way in which they register and demand an awareness of time, tends to short-circuit the conversion of moving time into fixed space which is the condition of self-identity. Bodies rub up against each other in the baths and in the fertile Mediterranean garden; they touch and intertwine, and make us want to touch them. I have tried to show that Ep. 86 is an engine for multiple, irreducible doubles whose specular opposition may fade, or flip, or shift into something nearer to identification over time.

Yet the palpable violence, even abjectification, performed in Ep. 86 also underlines the crucial cut-off point between live writer-guest and buried Master of the House. Scipio and Seneca are twins over time, yet they also fight it out as adversaries for future fame. I’ve suggested, in the wake of this paradox, that the letter projects an acute awareness of how far the corporeality and specularity of Senecan prose is indebted to Ovid (via Hellenistic and neoteric poetry) and to the development of Roman satire. In other words, it is only through this particular literary-historical lens that Scipio(nes)-Seneca can live on, spruced up, by being hacked to bits in exile.

What we are left with in the light of this discussion are some pressing larger questions. For instance, what role does Seneca’s clever meddling with the body of this hero play in the philosophical project, or process, of the Epistles? What to do with the contradiction, exposed here, between the ideal, impervious, constant Stoic sapiens and the post-Horatian, post-Ovidian poetics of the body with which Seneca (like so many other Neronian writers) so obsessively identifies? We might read Ep. 86 as a potentially comic, potentially self-satirizing exploration of an aporia, which sprouts and grows throughout Seneca’s philosophic corpus but especially in the Epistulae Morales: that the “psychic enclosure” the Stoic student is being taught to build up inside himself with the help of philosophy (even as Philosophy), to be construed as a rejection of the literal construction of fortified walls, risks reproducing what it rejects, risks revealing again the exile’s terrifying homelessness. In the Epistles, his prose text most invested in coping with time, Seneca immerses his readers in the near-impossibility of living Stoic ideals. More interestingly, he makes the pleasure of reading inseparable from this lingering. In Ep. 86, Seneca’s autopsy on Scipio the exile, the frustration of life as a proficiens is given a quasi-erotic outlet, remade as the irresistible desire to smell, to touch, to really live out the experience of a day in a letter.60

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