Episode 2\_UCL Podcast

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Hello, everyone, welcome to this podcast. My name is Mateen Arghandehpour and joining me today is Sofia Bongiovanni. She's a second year PhD student UCL working on violence in Seneca the younger. She completed her MA in classics at UCL working on Seneca again, and her BA in classics at Birkbeck University in London. She is also the Lyceum seminar co-chair at UCL. Hi, Sophia, how are you doing? Hi, thank you so much for having me. This is an exciting opportunity. No we're happy to have you. Now, Sofia, I would love to ask you about your research. And could you tell me a little bit about what you're doing in your PhD and your research right now? Yes, sure. So my PhD thesis is essentially a comparative study between Seneca the younger letters and his tragedies and this is done through an analysis of violence. So Seneca’s, letters, and tragedies, present very striking examples of violence, ones that are really, really impactful, and they stay with the reader, and it has often been discussed in some way or another, but always been brushed through. So what I'm doing is cataloguing all of them, and comparing and contrasting every single aspect through his use of violence. Okay, that sounds really interesting, actually. So just to make it more accessible. Can you tell me a bit more about Seneca himself? When did he live? What was his position? And why do we care about him? Yes, sure. So Seneca the younger was born in four BCE, in Cordoba, Spain, Spain at the time was already part of Rome. So he was actually the son of Seneca the Elder, who was a famous rhetor, and actually taught rhetoric and that is also why we differentiate between Seneca the elder and Seneca, the younger, he was also the uncle of the poet Lucan. And when he was young, he moved to Rome and studied philosophy and literature and rhetoric in Rome. And that is where he found his philosophical niche, because he was studying at the School of the Sextii, who taught stoic philosophy. And in fact, Seneca was a stoic. He then moved to Egypt for a while and returned to Rome under the Emperor Caligula who did not like him at all. To give some context, the Emperor Caligula was our third Emperor and this would be around the year 31 CE. After that, in 41, the next Emperor Claudius, didn’t like him again, and sent him been exiled to Corsica. And after his exile in Corsica, there comes the change in his life. And we find Agrippina, who is the mother of the Emperor Nero, who convinces the Emperor Claudius, to bring Seneca back and this is important. I see. And what happens then is that he becomes Nero's tutor. This is very important for sending us position in Rome at the time, because he comes to have a lot of power in Rome. This because in 54 CE, Claudius dies, or rather he is killed, and Nero comes to power. Nero becomes emperor at the young age of 17. And what happens is the real ruler at the time become Agrippina, Seneca and Agrippina’s, well, friend, Burrus, who was in charge of a number of things, including the Praetorian Guard, and from now on, Seneca starts writing numerous speeches he is basically the voice behind Nero. Unfortunately, when Nero starts to gain independence from Agrippina, he also gains

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independence from Seneca and sends him away up until 65 CE, which is when Nero sentenced Seneca to death. And so he tells him to commit suicide. Committing suicide was the way in which Nero sentenced people to death in his time. And this because some conspiracy had arised is the famous conspiracy of Piso, which is one of the bigger conspiracies that threatened Nero's rule, and which made the Emperor Nero wary of his surroundings and of everything, and it's sort of one of the things that made him go, quote, crazy. And when somebody informed Nero that Seneca was involved in this conspiracy and he sent him to commit suicide. Now that we have some background on Seneca’s life and what's happened in it, Sofia, can you talk more about why Seneca’s writing is so interesting in regard to violence? And what is the violence you look for? How do you define this violence? is it a small slap or how do you define it? Okay, that is very interesting question. Thank you, Seneca’s violence is recognizable, I think from disgust. So, there is always something there is an almost unnatural. So, there's common violence, right? Something that well, in antiquity will be defined as a soldier dying in battle, and hero killing himself with a sword. And then there’s the violence that we find in Seneca, is violence that involves weird objects, that involves walls even a little trigger warning, there is a slave in the letters, who kills himself by bashing his head against the wall of the house where he is a servant. And we find mothers who kill their children, which is common, right, but is described with a sense of disgust. There is always something that makes you uncomfortable. And the interesting thing in the letters is that they give them a lot of space, because it's a private type of communication, or rather, in Seneca’s case is mock private communication. This is because these letters, though, they very much appear like a normal letter. So they have a greeting, and a body. And then the final goodbye, they are collected all in a book and they are addressed to this friend Lucretius, who most likely didn't exist.

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It is an epistolary collection, exactly is a collection of epistles. But contrary to that, for example of another famous Roman author, Cicero, where they were real letters that were published, Seneca’s are made up, and they're all made up with an intent to teach his philosophy. Right. So he made up mock letters to teach people who read them a point. Exactly, yes, it ìs fiction, but looks very much real. and is easy to read, which is good, because they point, theoretically, at another aspiring philosopher,

yeah. So I have a question for you. So you pointed out that Seneca the younger has this stoic philosophical background and the tendency to be all about that. And at the same time, he has all of these works that are intended to teach his philosophical work, but also display this extreme violence as you do with mothers killing their children's or so on and so forth.

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Is there a relationship between Seneca’s stoicism and the violence in his work? And could you also tell me a little bit more about stoicism? Yes. So starting from stoicism, stoicism is a school of Hellenistic philosophy, which was founded by Zeno around early third century before Common Era. And while it was initially based on materialism, it slowly became more focused on the concept of ethics, and it was diffused all around the Hellenistic period and you

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have quite a large number of stoics, around, larger in, in Greece than at Rome. At Rome, we only have three around three or four stoics. The most famous are Seneca the younger, and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Now, on stoicism, what we need to take from it, in order to analyze the violence are two main things. First of all, they had an idea of afterlife. So they have what is called a cosmology. So an idea of how the world works, right. And for them, there was something after life, the speaker's, the soul, once own body is made up of the flesh, and the soul is in there, but this all for them was material, and what after one died, the soul would go up in the air and go up, up, up up, and stay in this place, imaginary place, which is part of the cosmos. Now, why is this important? This is important, because the stoics contemplated suicide. And this was part of the ethics of this because they said, you should not be afraid of death, this contemplation of suicide, which is important towards my researcher, is that one should commit suicide only in an extreme situation only if

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a set of specific requirements are met. Now, this set of specific requirements is not clear. And unfortunately for us, stoic philosophy tends to contradict itself a little bit, mainly in terms that they have this deterministic idea that after that, the soul survives. But at the same time, you have a number of choices to make it so that your death is worth and your life is worth of

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worth of the philosophy. This is. And here comes the day when the common conception that we have nowadays as well, like we do say you are so stoic, because you go through all of this, everything like I don't know one that persists through something called soy, you're very stoic. But at the same time, they did have choices. It was admitted to change your faith in a way if your faith was not ethical, and this is where violence comes in. We do find quite a good number of suicides and contemplated suicides in Seneca the younger and in both in the tragedies and in the letters. Now the suicides that we find in the tragedies are suicides, famous suicides. So we have Jocasta from the Oedipus. Jocasta was the mother and wife of a Oedipus. And she committed suicide with the sword of Oedipus, this because she had slept with her son, unknowingly slept with her son and married her son. And we have Phaedra from Seneca’s Phaedra, which is taken after the Greek tragedy of Euripides, the Hyppolitus. Phaedra is taken by the desire to sleep with her stepson, and in the end the steps on dies, and she commit suicide because she was the cause of his death. In the letters. On the other hand, we have suicides that are based more on the physical violence rather than obstructive violence. So instead of mothers step -mothers sleeping with sons or self, we have real people all come from all different parts of Roman society, who commit suicide in rather gruesome ways. As I mentioned before the slave who trigger warning bangs his head against the wall and smashes it actually, or one that I spend a lot of time on. This is quite interesting. And he's a gladiator who kills himself by sticking

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a sponge. So there's this thing called Tersorium, which is a stick with a sponge attached to it, which was used to clean one’s own privates after relieving

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oneself, and he sticks it down his throat and kills himself. And he's Yes, it's a really strong image. And this the weather goes hand in hand with the concept of knowing when to kill oneself, right?

So why did these examples kill themselves? Is there a reason given or do they,

in the letters, the reason is very clearly given. So for example, this Gladiator as Seneca states, the only time that he asked to go to the alone is when he goes to the bathroom. And he manages to go before being carried to the mourning spectacles where he was destined to buy a fight with the beasts. And so die, most likely an honorable death, right? Because he's just there is unarmed, and he's just food for the beast. So it's about honor for him. Yes, very true is about what they call this to so on or virtual. And it's about time, because he does know that that is the time. And that is the only time that he has any

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in hand. And obviously, if you say, if you give this example, right, that is unbearable, then it makes the choices that you're going to have to have to do as a elite Roman person was most likely reading this much easier. If you read something so striking, right? Yeah. So Sofia, I have another question for you. You said that Seneca himself ended up committing suicide by the orders of nearer. Is there anything interesting about his own suicide? ironic as it is? Thank you for this question. There is quite a lot actually, that is interesting about this suicide, not only because of the connection with his own doctrine, right? Here is in a way, pro suicide only in the specific cases. So basically, when we find this out from the historian Tacitus, in his analysis, and basically, when the Seneca was ordered to commit suicide, he was in his country house, dining, dinner, and he received the letter reads it, and then you start preparing to kill himself. And what happens is, he can't kill himself, nothing seems to work, he goes through a whole process of trying to suffocate himself in the bathroom. And that that some work, he dries poison, it doesn't work. In the end, he cuts his wrists, which is the most common process. But it takes so long that at a certain point, even his wife had started to commit suicide, because it took so long that it's like, oh, I might as well get started. So is this almost comics scene? Because it takes him so so long, and there's actually a painting It is in Brussels, and it is from Jacques Louis, David, you will be able to find it on the website connected to this. And in this painting, you can see Seneca laying down with pointing his wrists at somebody and he Yes, like a bowl underneath him feel with blood, and a lot of people around them because this was actually didn't happen when you were alone. And this is a very interesting contrast with the characters, his characters, most of them are alone when they commit suicide, not all of them, but most of them are alone. Do you think he would have liked his own suicide? If you read about this in your book? My opinion? Probably not. Because it's almost ironic, and it is opposite of a suicide are very famous, where suicide, murder suicide depends on how things have it right. This could be argued as a murder as well, at of Socrates, the venom, and it's very opposite to it. He takes him so long. Now, we don't know if this is completely true, because we need to be wary of our historical sources. But it is truly fascinating, I think.

Absolutely. And also, being mindful of the fact that this all happened under Nero's reign. What was near his brain like was the what was the atmosphere like does the core and the violence and all of this kind of stuff relate to Nero and his reign at all?

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That is actually a very interesting phenomenon. And it's something that has long been debated this because Nero’s reign was famous for a him at a certain point starting to kill send people to be killed like Seneca. These are the sources that are lost because of bad omens saying that somebody was going to overthrow him. Nero’s reign is a period of change his gains. So the family from which he comes from is the family of the first Emperor the gens Julia, so of Augustus, the Emperor Augustus and of Julius Caesar. And it is almost as if the line has come to an end is the empire of his uncle. Claudius was already really weak, and his own is really weak. And so it's certainly a period of change. But it's also a period that sees a lot of,

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violence, Roman violence coming to an extreme. So, a lot of violence, because not only gladiators fought to death, and they fought sometimes with beasts, but executions will happen in

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gladiatorial shows as an intermission. There is actually a letter of Seneca, which describes this, and it says, a little throat cut thing in the meantime, because while they were fighting, that maybe they needed time to clean up or move things and so or if there was beasts, they needed to move the beasts or something so that the audience wouldn't get bored. They executed criminals. And Nero loves games. These they do they do some games. Yeah. And the literature of the period is certainly reflective of violence, not only Seneca’s literature, but also we find Petronius, who we don't know exactly ways, he writes, the satirical and in the certificate, there's really striking imagery of a freed slave was become very wealthy. And the scene has been compared to what journey to the underworld. The character talks about his own death, the clothes, he wants to wear the funeral. Then we have Lucan. Lucan, who was actually Seneca’s nephew, he was the son of his brother. And he was very active under Nero. And he was actually sent to death by Nero himself, because he was a better poet, than Nero. And before being sent to that he wrote this book, which talks about the worst thing that can happen for Romans, which is Civil War. And it is quite of actually a parody of it. It exaggerated things in a way that id sometimes similar to Seneca’s, and so definitely, there has to be some kind of connection, some argue for not being one, but there certainly is a period of change.

Absolutely. Okay. Well, thank you Sofia, so much for being with us today.

Thank you very much for having me.