SENECA RISING: EPISTOLARY SELF-RECREATION IN THE AD HELVIAM

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‘Inventa sunt specula ut homo ipse se nosset…’
‘Mirrors were invented so that a person may come to know herself…’
Seneca, Natural Questions (1.4.1)

Abstract: Following his relegation to Corsica in AD 42, Seneca the Younger wrote the ad Helviam, a consolatory letter ostensibly offering his mother Helvia comfort and support in the face of his deathlike absence through exile. The addressees of Seneca’s letters served different purposes for him, and here, because he is addressing his mother, who birthed him, Seneca creates within the ad Helviam a space for rebirth, a means of reviving and repairing a self left shattered by the trauma of exile. Reading Seneca’s consolation through the lens of psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut’s theory of the ‘tripolar self’, I suggest that in this letter Seneca satisfies his needs for mirroring, for an idealized other, and for twinnship, which are requisite for his self-recreation. Through this process, Seneca also provides Helvia with the tools she needs to recreate her own self after the ‘loss’ of Seneca; both son and mother are thus reborn.

When Claudius so unexpectedly became emperor in AD 41, one of his first acts as ruler was to charge Seneca the Younger with adultery. The co-respondent in this case was Julia Livilla, recently recalled from the Pontine Islands where her brother, the emperor Caligula, had banished her three years earlier. For Julia Livilla, history was repeating itself. Just as her first exile was probably motivated by Caligula’s fears that she and her sister Agrippina were conspiring to make their widowed brother-in-law Lepidus emperor, so too is it likely that Claudius’ accusation of adultery against her and Seneca was an efficient means of ridding his new court of two potential conspirators rather than a response to evidence of an actual adulterous relationship.¹

Some debate seems to have attended Seneca’s sentencing, but in AD 42 he was relegated to Corsica, where in the first years of his residence he wrote a consolation to his mother Helvia presumably ‘mourning’ her absent son.² As an alternative to the death penalty, exile is often described within the Roman literary tradition in terms of a living death, and we may infer that it would not have been an effective punishment had it not brought about some diminishment not only of quality of life, property, and social identity, but also of one’s very sense of self. The trauma of exile may lead, therefore, to a shattering, a fragmentation of a previously strong and cohesive self.

Inspired by Eleanor Winsor Leach’s exemplary scholarship on epistolary self-presentation and the construction of the addressee, I use psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut’s theory

¹ For more on the probable causes of this charge, see Griffin 1976: 288; Veyne 2003: 7; and E. R. Wilson 2014: 81–82.

² Like Ovid, Seneca was technically ‘relegated’ to Corsica. I use the term ‘exile’ throughout this essay, as the particular psychological experiences Seneca describes in the consolation are much like those of other exilic literature. (For Cicero’s equation of exile and death, see Keitel in this volume.) See also Claassen 1996: 586 and Fantham 2007 for more on the circumstances surrounding the composition of the ad Helviam.
of the ‘tripolar self’ to argue that the *ad Helviam* represents a conscious effort by Seneca to recompose the various pieces of his and his mother’s shattered selves. Seneca harnesses the power of epistolary performance to create an image of his mother which serves both to reflect the ideal self he requires to recreate himself after his ‘death’ by exile and to provide his mother with an idealized image on which she might model her own self-recreation. The *ad Helviam* acts as a kind of two-sided idealizing mirror. The author/writer Seneca looks into it from his side and sees there the idealized image of himself, unified and coherent, that he creates for his mother’s sake, instead of the imperfect, incomplete self he is in exile. The recipient/addressee Helvia looks into it from her side and sees there the idealized self-image her son has made of her, the more perfect self that she could become. Through his consolation, Seneca is the midwife of his own rebirth as well as that of his mother.

Seneca’s choice to provide the tools for his and his mother’s revivification in the form of a letter concerns much more than just the practicalities of communicating over long distances. Often writings such as this one were meant for the reading public at large and not only the specific addressee, so why did Seneca not choose to write an oration or a dialogue that could more effectively reach the reading public of Rome? Whereas another genre would suffice if Seneca’s only goal were to communicate to a general audience how a good Stoic faces the travails of exile, or to shore up his reputation from afar, in order to reach his mother in such a way as to be able to aid her recovery of self, a more intimate form of address is necessary. Seneca will also favour the more intimate epistolary genre later in life as the vehicle for his philosophy when he writes his didactic letters, the *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, to Lucilius, though those letters, too, were likely meant for a general readership and not just Lucilius. It is not surprising then that Seneca would choose to write in an epistolary form that can both reach his mother and provide for her recreation and teach a broader readership, who also can enjoy the added pleasure of ‘eavesdropping’, so to speak, on the ostensibly private correspondence between Seneca and his mother. The *ad Helviam* as a letter contains within it the power to ‘effect change’, to transform the feelings and personage of Seneca, his mother, and individual members of the larger audience to whom he also ‘speaks’.

E. W. Leach has been particularly sensitive to the letter’s suitability for the expression of an ever changing performance of self, and compares Cicero’s perception of his own imperfection and incompleteness to the ‘Lacanian subject of desire’ because ‘the images he constructs for the eyes of his correspondents will appear less like stable portraits than mirrors wistfully reflecting an absent self through the very gesture of assimilating that

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3 I would like to extend my warmest thanks to Ellie Leach for her ongoing encouragement, and for many enlivening conversations about reading, opera, and travel in Rome and New England. This essay is inspired, in particular, by Leach 1990, 1999, and 2006. I would also like to thank Teresa Ramsby and Ann Vasaly for their patience and very generous editorial interventions, and my colleague R. Scott Smith and the anonymous readers for further suggestions. All remaining errors are obviously my own.

4 Seneca’s interest in mirrors, actual and metaphorical, is clear from his discussions in *QNat.* 1 and the first sentence of *Clem.* 1.1, where he claims that his writing can act as a mirror for Nero, which, in Seneca’s hands, would reflect back an idealized image of a merciful prince.

5 For more on the audience for the epistolary genre, see Zeiner-Carmichael 2014: 2–3. For a recent discussion of the consolation, see Scourfield 2013. Regarding Seneca’s unique take on the consolation, see Claassen 1999: 93. Scholars have long been loath to categorize any of Seneca’s consolations as letters, but the *ad Helviam* has a clear addressee. We might more accurately describe it as an essay in letter form. Fantham (2007) also uses the terms ‘consolations’ and ‘letters’ interchangeably.
We can also understand the Senecan self of the *ad Helviam* in terms of the Lacanian subject of desire, and view Seneca’s creation of an idealized image of his mother as an essentially futile attempt to see in that image a reflection of an absolutely impossible, but perfect and complete self, and to provide the same unrealizable image of his own complete self for his mother. The condition of exile as a kind of death-in-life only adds a considerable sense of urgency to an already insatiable desire to close the gap between one’s actual ego and the ideal towards which it strives. However, rather than focusing on the impossibility of Seneca ever satisfying a desire for a wholeness of self, I would like to shift focus to the way Seneca in the *ad Helviam* attempts to close the gap between hungry individual ego, the persona of Seneca as author/writer, and the perfect and complete ‘object’ towards which the ego tends: the idealized portrait he paints of his mother as recipient/addressee, as ‘other’, and vice versa.

**I. Seneca and Kohut: a match made in ... exile?**

Although the term ‘other’ has a multitude of meanings, I use it here in one of its psychoanalytical guises to refer to an ‘object’, usually another human being, who is absolutely necessary for an individual to develop a differentiated, whole, and cohesive self. This usage aligns with Heinz Kohut’s concepts of the ‘tripolar self’ and ‘selfobjects’. Kohut was an Austrian-American psychoanalyst who in the mid-twentieth century established a psychoanalytic theory proposing that a self becomes whole through relationships with others. Kohut called the whole or complete self a ‘tripolar’ self because it is one for which the three ‘poles’ or ‘axes’ of the self have been satisfied by fulfilling each of its selfobject needs. The development of a cohesive or tripolar self depends upon the satisfaction of: 1) the grandiosity pole, which requires stable self-esteem and the satisfaction of the selfobject need for mirroring, for admiration from another; 2) the idealization pole, which requires stable goals, ideals, and values and the satisfaction of the selfobject need for the idealization of and merger with an idealized other; and 3) the alter-ego connectedness pole, which requires particular kinds of relationships with others, the feeling of belonging within a valued group and the satisfaction of the selfobject need for twinship, for a feeling of similarity to and connection with others. The following analysis attempts to show how Seneca provides for the selfobject needs and recreation of the three poles of self for both himself and his mother in the *ad Helviam*. By refashioning himself *vis-à-vis* his mother, Seneca quite sensibly utilizes the same selfobject that likely served his relational needs for self-creation as a child; only this time, Seneca can return the service.

How we define the ‘self’ that Seneca attempts to recreate through this letter is a particularly thorny problem and has been the subject of much recent scholarly attention. Most troubling among the issues surrounding the Senecan self is that of the relationship between the ideal ‘Stoic’ self that Seneca encourages his readers to develop and the many masks Seneca had to wear to negotiate the dangers of life at court. I want to be very clear that when I refer to the ‘self’ in the analysis of the *ad Helviam* that follows, I am referring to

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6 Leach 1999: 145–46.

7 The major works of Kohut behind this analysis are Kohut 1971 and Kohut 1977. See also Banai, Mikulincer, and Shaver 2005: 225.


9 See especially Bartsch 2006; Bartsch and Wray 2009; Graver 2014; Bartsch 2015.
what we can perceive as the *aim* of the various types of self-improvement Seneca promotes and enacts through his writings. Whether Seneca in daily life ever achieved the creation of the kind of ideal, unified Stoic self he is presumed to have set as a goal is beside the point. We can only ‘know’ Seneca through his writings, and the Senecan selves evident in the writings are personae that may or may not align perfectly or at all with the ‘real’ Seneca. We can, however, gain some understanding of what Seneca is trying to achieve through his creation of these various personae always striving for self-improvement.

It is also likely that the achievement of a ‘fully Stoic self’ is, in reality, beyond the reach of mere mortals, even of Seneca himself. C. Gill has observed that ‘Stoicism operates with a unified or “holistic” psychological model in which all adult human responses reflect beliefs […] But, although all human adults are in this sense unified, it is only the ideal wise person who is completely integrated and coherent; the psychological life of the non-wise person is marked by vacillation and inner conflict’.10 My contention regarding the *ad Helviam* is that the trauma of exile has upset whatever degree of integration and coherence both Seneca and his mother had managed to achieve. The writing of the *ad Helviam* and, presumably, the reading of it provide a way to restore or recreate a more unified and coherent self for writer and addressee.

Oddly, it is through the epistolary performance of multiple personae that Seneca creates for us a model of practice which has as its impossible goal a stable, permanent, and unified Stoic self. S. Bartsch describes the Senecan self as one striving for a ‘perfect serenity that we never see it gaining in any permanent way’, but the situation is not as hopeless as all that.11 Elsewhere, discussing Seneca’s *De ira* (*On Anger*), Bartsch suggests that playing a particular role may eventually lead to the role becoming something more than a mere performance. ‘What was initially a role’, Bartsch writes, ‘can through force of habit become the authentic person’.12 Might that be the case, too, for the creation of various epistolary personae, which is a kind of role play through writing?

Both the ideal Senecan self and Kohut’s tripolar self have as their goal a cohesive, unified self; both, too, understand the self as not *given* but *created*. As E. Banai, M. Mikulincer, and P. Shaver write regarding Kohut’s notion of selfobjects: ‘The need is not simply to be seen or to have an ideal person to merge with or to have alter ego experiences, the need is to actually be created, *be made*.’13 Similarly, Seneca’s epistolary personae serve not just as static models to imitate, but as an enactment of a process, of a potential path one can take towards the creation of a unified self. Seneca’s ideal self may not map perfectly onto his actual day-to-day embodied life with its demands and compromises, but the writing itself, the act of creating epistolary personae, achieves in some sense its aim. What, then, is a Stoic sage in training to do to endure a dangerous and oppressive regime and transcend the living death of exile? Take the opportunity to enact a method of self-recreation, to script new selves for himself and his mother that likely represent his own thoughts, but because improved, stabilized, and externalized through writing, have become transcendent images that serve as examples to Seneca, his mother,

10 Gill 2009: 71.
11 Bartsch 2015: 188.
12 Bartsch 2006: 211, where Bartsch also notes: ‘The life as a Stoic student is seen as the struggle to play a role well — the role of himself.’ See also Graver 2014: 276 and her extension of Foucault to demonstrate how ‘self-scripting’, constructing a ‘better’ self through writing, is a means of ‘self-transcendence’.
and others as they work their way — or write their way — towards the achievement of more cohesive and unified selves.

II. Resuscitating the Senecan self

At the start of the consolation, Seneca makes it very clear that both he and his mother are suffering, are, indeed, wounded. ‘And so’, he writes, ‘when I placed my hand over my own wound, I was trying, in one way or another, to crawl forth in order to bind up your wounds’ (Helv. 1.1–2: ‘itaque utcumque conabar manu super plagam meam imposita ad obliganda uulnera uestra reptare’). However, he also believes in the potential of both of them to heal the wounds of exile through the recreation of their shattered selves. Essentially, we can trace Seneca’s redevelopment from an infant-like state of crawling towards his mother to recreating himself and providing the tools for his mother’s recreation, by attending to how he constructs the ‘objects’ he requires to fulfil Kohut’s three selfobject needs: the need for the attainment of a stable sense of self-esteem (‘grandiosity pole’) through ‘mirroring’, the need for idealization (‘idealization pole’), which involves the creation of an idealized image of the selfobject and a sense of merging with this idealized other, and the need for ‘twinning’ (‘alter-ego connectedness pole’), the creation of the feeling of similarity and connectedness to others. By relating the content of the ad Helviam to the functions performed by selfobjects in terms of the formation and recreation of a cohesive self, we can further understand and appreciate the therapeutic role this consolation plays in Seneca’s own resuscitation and that of his mourning mother.14

III. Satisfying the need for a stable sense of self-esteem

Seneca begins by reasserting the good health of his self-esteem in order to create a self strong enough to help his mother with her own self-recreation. His likening of himself to a corpse (Helv. 1.3) and his description of his own sense of being wounded (Helv. 1.1–2) demonstrate how great his need for rebuilding a healthy self-esteem as an exile is. He has been injured; he has been ‘killed’. In other words, Seneca begins here to create a mirror in which he sees not a reflection of what he is, a man injured and weakened by exile, but of what he needs and aims to be, a man with a strong and healthy estimation of himself.

Seneca recreates a stable sense of self-esteem in four main ways. First, after his initial moment of self-doubt regarding his ability to heal his mother’s wounds, Seneca recovers and expresses a tremendous degree of confidence in his ability to comfort his mourning mother. He is certain of his mother’s need for consolation, since her loss of him is, he suggests, the most grievous of the many losses she has experienced (Helv. 3.1: ‘grauissimum est ex omnibus, quae umquam in corpus tuum descenderunt recens uulnus, fateor; non summum cutem rupit, pectus et uiscera ipsa diuisit’). Note, in particular, Seneca’s use of the superlative ‘grauissimum’, ‘extremely serious’, to describe this ‘recent wound’ (‘recens uulnus’). Seneca’s vivid physical description of his mother’s wound, which penetrates both her chest and her innards (‘pectus et uiscera’), or we might say her breast and her womb, those areas of a woman’s body most associated with motherhood, provides a metaphor for her psychological wound of bereavement and harkens back to the linkage he created between his mother’s body and his own through woundedness at the beginning of the

14 Latin quotes are from Reynolds’ 1977 Oxford text. All translations are my own. For a discussion of absence and presence in Seneca’s other epistolary works, see C. Edwards 2015.
consolation, thus raising his own status as comforter to almost heroic levels. After all, the more grievous the wound, the more impressive the one who can heal it. Seneca is certain that he is the one individual most likely to ameliorate her grief (Helv. 1.4: ‘sed quia possum instar efficacissimae consolationis esse ipse conso  

lator’). Here Seneca uses the intensifying pronoun ‘ipse’ and the superlative ‘efficacissimae’ to describe how he himself has the most effective solace to offer his mother. He makes similar claims as to his consolatory abilities in the next few sections of the ad Helviam when he confidently states that he has more power over his mother than grief has over her, and, although his cure may hurt her more than the wound, Seneca is sure his mother knows from past experiences how to suffer and survive (Helv. 2.1 and 3.2–4.1).

Second, Seneca defiantly claims that he is happy in exile, cannot even be made to feel unhappy, and asks his mother not to believe the negative reports of others (Helv. 4.2–3). The probability of his being happy in reality during the time in which he was composing the ad Helviam is very low indeed, but by creating a persona or, to borrow M. Graver’s term, by ‘scripting’ a self that makes a claim for happiness, he is taking a step towards actually becoming authentically happy. In terms of performance, the role his persona plays may become a habit of being. In terms of self-recreation, Seneca’s construction of a persona for himself that declares itself happy provides him with a mirror image that reflects back to him a picture of a confident man undiminished by exile. He goes further. Alluding to his Stoic ideals and aims for self-improvement, he writes that if he were a truly wise man, he would be able to claim not only that he was not unhappy, but that he was the most fortunate man of all (Helv. 5.2). His goal of a transcendent, unified, and coherent self is clear, but he has many more steps to take on his journey towards that goal. Creating a persona that ‘cannot even be made to be unhappy’ in exile is a significant step in the right direction. Self-scripting the role of a man for whom unhappiness is impossible is an essential prerequisite for becoming the happiest of men.

Third, Seneca addresses how exile was conceived as a punishment, but rather than accept that status for himself, he ‘naturalizes’ exile, beginning with its most obvious characteristic, a change of location. Seneca describes such a change as not only normal but desired, even purposely pursued. He assures his mother that exile is not the horror others have made of it (Helv. 5.6), suggesting that wise men know to ignore these claims. Even deserted places, even the harshest islands, he writes to her, have inhabitants (Helv. 6.4). He further notes that ‘some say that there is a natural spur in our minds’ (Helv. 6.6: ‘qui dicunt inesse naturalem quandam irritationem animis’) that impels us to want to change our location. Once more, he states, the human mind is happiest (‘laetissima’) when it is free to wander, and after all, he adds, do not celestial objects also wander? Furthermore, does it not make sense that human beings have minds that love to roam given that they are made of the same material as divine celestial beings, who take pleasure in and even survive because of their continuous and swiftest movement (Helv. 6.8: ‘dei natura adsidua et citatissima commutatione uel delectet se uel conseruet’)? By utilizing Stoic concepts of divine nature, Seneca transforms exile from a punishment into a ‘natural’ and even godlike part of the human condition.

Finally, Seneca provides himself with exempla likening his own situation to that of famous exiles of the past, and Aeneas in particular (Helv. 7.5–7). Interestingly, after listing by name a number of other renowned exiles from the time of the Trojan War, Seneca does not name Aeneas. Instead, he simply states that the Roman Empire looks back to an exile as its founder.
or author ('auctor'). Seneca’s use of the word ‘auctor’ for Aeneas, which could also be used to refer to Seneca himself, as well as his decision not to mention Aeneas by name, opens up enough of what we might refer to as ‘a space of anonymity’ — albeit one derived from as renowned a figure as Aeneas — into which Seneca can insert his own growing sense of self. Seneca completely reverses the symbolic meaning of exile through this likening of himself, an author, to the ‘author’ of Rome. The state that has sent him away was ‘authored’ by an exile like himself, and now Seneca has rewritten his own exile as author recreating himself through the construction of a persona that can revive his shattered self-esteem.

IV. Satisfying the need for an ideal other

As noted above, ‘idealization’, through which an individual embraces stable goals, ideals, and values, involves the creation of an idealized image of the selfobject and, at the same time, includes the experience of merging with this idealized selfobject. To accomplish this through his mother as addressee, Seneca needs to imagine a perfect and complete self for Helvia, with whom to identify and merge. To achieve this, Seneca employs three methods. He first lists the many tragedies that his mother has suffered but nonetheless survived (Helv. 2.1–3). We can liken this strategy to the one discussed above, wherein Seneca constructs a persona of a survivor for himself, of one able to overcome the ‘death’ of exile, and is, as a result, so much more admirable for surviving than one who has never suffered a grave misfortune. Later, he invokes his ancestors as generic self-sufficient parental ideals to which he can aspire (Helv. 10.7). Finally, he idealizes Helvia herself as the example of a good mother (Helv. 14.1–3).

The most important of the idealizing portraits Seneca creates of his mother occurs early in the ad Helviam. Seneca lists six events that Helvia has experienced and survived: 1) she lost her own mother in birth (perhaps indicating that she is very much in need herself of the mirroring Seneca, as selfobject, will provide for her); 2) Helvia’s own affection helped to transform her stepmother into a proper mother; 3) her brother died when she was awaiting his arrival; 4) within thirty days of that death, her own husband died and none of their children were present when she received the news; 5) she has suffered the death of three grandchildren, including Seneca’s own son, who died in her arms; 6) and, finally, within twenty days of that loss, she endured the gravest loss of all, that of Seneca himself, to ‘death’ by exile. What is more, Seneca includes among this already impressive list of misfortunes the claim that he could name many other dangers that have struck Helvia without pause, which she has endured with great strength. This ability to withstand and persevere, without the ‘vacillation and inner conflict’ of what C. Gill calls ‘a non-wise person’ (2009: 71) — or perhaps we should say to be scripted as having responded to misfortune with courage and perseverance — is integral to Seneca’s depiction of Helvia as the ideal addressee through which he can fulfil his own selfobject need for idealization.

Seneca also creates a portrait of his mother as a ‘good Roman woman’ to satisfy this need for an ideal other. He notes how Helvia values her loved ones only for themselves, and he praises her for being the kind of mother who does not use her son’s position to exercise her own power covertly as other women do (Helv. 14.2). The persona Seneca constructs for his mother is one of a unified and cohesive self able to bear a multitude of misfortunes with strength and resolve, and of a ‘good Roman woman’ who does not ask her children to be other than they are and does not use them to fulfil her own thwarted ambitions. This is the image Seneca needs to have reflected back to him when he ‘looks’ at the figure he is creating to fulfil his need for an ideal other, and so this is the portrait of his mother that he paints.
It should be noted, however, that Helvia is not the only figure he constructs in order to satisfy his selfobject need for idealization. Seneca also follows his Stoic predecessors in utilizing historical exempla in order to provide models of self towards which to strive. While not as vital to his reassembly of self as is his mother, who is a real-life ‘significant other’ for Seneca, the idealized portraits of historical exiles he creates also contribute to his rehabilitation of the generally negative view of exile by transforming it into a condition that nurtures the most virtuous of men. For Seneca, Marcus Claudius Marcellus is one such man. Marcellus, a supporter of Pompey and enemy of Julius Caesar, lived as an exile in Mytilene following the Battle of Pharsalus in 48 BC.\textsuperscript{16} Seneca, who devotes a whole section of the \textit{ad Helviam} to praising Marcellus, describes how when Brutus visited Marcellus at Mytilene, he found a man who was living ‘most blessedly’, not just for an exile, but for any human being (\textit{Helv.} 9.4). So affected was Brutus that when he was about to return to Rome, he felt that in leaving such a man behind he himself was the true exile (\textit{Helv.} 9.4–5), and notes that Marcellus enjoyed far more favour in exile by receiving Brutus’ approval than when he won the approval of the Roman state as consul (\textit{Helv.} 9.5). Far from being a pitiable state of living death, exile can enable a virtuous person such as Marcellus to live the most blessed of lives. By describing Marcellus through the eyes of Brutus, Seneca also models for the reader the operation of the selfobject need for an ideal other. In describing Marcellus through the admiring gaze of Brutus, Seneca essentially makes Marcellus into an idealizing figure for Brutus, who, in feeling himself an exile upon leaving Mytilene, seems to experience a sense of merger with Marcellus. His portrait of Brutus allows Seneca to experience a feeling of merger as well: he and Brutus are alike and connected through their mutual idealization and admiration of Marcellus.

\textit{V. Satisfying the need for similarity and connectedness}

Seneca also constructs in his mother a figure who can provide for his need for ‘twinship’ — that is, for a ‘parental figure to whom [he is] allowed to feel similar and with whom [he is] encouraged to feel “part of” a group that surrounds and protects [him]’\textsuperscript{17}. In essence, the whole of the consolation, its composition, and the particular way Seneca creates a persona for his mother as addressee within it, enacts Seneca’s overall desire to repair this part of himself. Even the idea that his mother is suffering terribly as a result of his absence at the beginning of the consolation affirms the positive nature of the relationship mother and son enjoyed before exile — or that Seneca is scripting for them retrospectively — and the ‘memory’ of such a relationship, real or imagined, helps establish the idea of belonging not somewhere in particular, but with someone in particular, namely his mother. Seneca’s depiction of himself as one demonstrating fortitude in enduring the losses caused by exile, and his description of the many tragedies his mother has suffered and survived, underline their similarities both in terms of experience and their way of responding to difficult experiences. It is very directly through Seneca’s choice of Helvia

\textsuperscript{16} For the fate of Marcellus, see Cic. \textit{Att.} 13.10 and Cic. \textit{Fam.} 4.12. Fantham (2007: 191) notes that ‘writing to Helvia, he [Seneca] transfers into the old civil war context the pride and self-sufficiency of the philosophical exile, leaving at the remove of almost a century any suggestion of oppression at Rome’. Ker (2009: 107) also observes that even in the \textit{Natural Questions} Seneca may be covertly alluding to conditions in Rome when he discusses aftershocks in Campania. Ker writes that ‘occasionally a political motif, such as the description of the aftershocks as shaking Campania “with greater clemency” (6.31.1: ‘clementius’), hints at the possibility that the natural incidents for which he is offering therapy could be analogous to tremors in the social and political world of Rome’.

\textsuperscript{17} Banai, Mikulincer, and Shaver, 2005: 227.
as addressee and his construction of her persona that Seneca is able to satisfy his need for similarity and connectedness.

Seneca further satisfies this need by putting his own words in the mouth of his mother so that it is as though he has for a moment possessed her body, even returned to his source, and is using it as a vehicle for his own expression. The questions that Seneca puts in his mother’s mouth are an imagined rendering of her own words, but, as writer, they are also his: “‘Where are the conversations for which I was insatiable? Where are our studies, which I engaged in with more delight than a woman’s, with more intimacy than a mother’s?’” (*Helv.* 15.1: ‘ubi conloquia, quorum inexplebilis eram? ubi studia, quibus libertius quam femina, familiarius quam mater intereram?’) Whether or not such questions are ones the ‘real’ Helvia would ever ask is irrelevant. Seneca scripts these questions for his mother because he needs to hear her ask them, no matter that it was he who put these words in her mouth.

Later, Seneca’s need for similarity and connectedness motivates him to give his mother a piece of advice, which is also indirectly directed at himself. ‘And so, I lead you’, he writes, ‘to that in which all those who are fugitives from Fortune must seek refuge, to philosophical studies’ (*Helv.* 17.3: ‘itaque illo te duco quo omnibus, qui fortunam fugiunt confugiendum est, ad liberalia studia’). As we know, Seneca spent his years of exile studying philosophy among other subjects so that, although this statement is couched in advice to his mother, he is exhorting himself to take refuge in philosophical studies as well. The double use of the verb ‘fugio’ in ‘fugiunt’ and ‘confugiendum’ suggests that there are two in flight here. Mother and son are twin refugees of a sort. The intertwining of Seneca’s exilic wound with that of his mother’s and his proffering of a philosophic bandage for each of them creates the impression that mother and son are undergoing a simultaneous trauma and recovery.

**VI. Providing selfobjects for Helvia’s own self-recreation**

This simultaneity of trauma and recovery extends to Seneca’s incorporating selfobjects into the consolation through which Helvia can also recreate her own shattered self. Although space does not allow me to detail all the tools Seneca embeds in his letter for his mother’s self-recreation, I will relate a few examples to each of the three selfobject needs. For example, the list of the misfortunes Helvia endured prior to her son’s exile (*Helv.* 14.1–3), which provides Seneca with an idealized image of his mother, can also remind Helvia of her own ability to withstand life’s many trials and thus contribute to her re-establishing a stable sense of self-esteem. Seneca further attempts to bolster Helvia’s good opinion of herself by placing her in the context of other women and describing her as avoiding some of the vices he clearly associates with women.18 Seneca addresses her, saying that life has ‘demanded braver things from you from the beginning and that the excuse of being a woman cannot touch you who have always kept away from all the faults of a woman’ (*Helv.* 16.2: ‘a te plus exigit uita ab initio fortior; non potest muliebris excusatio contingere ei a qua omnia muliebria utia affuerunt’). As a woman who has had to demonstrate greater fortitude than most, Helvia should neither follow the example of women whose sorrow is without end nor underestimate her own abilities. Her outstanding qualities have already been sufficiently developed and tested. Nevertheless, Seneca provides additional examples of exceptional

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18 For a different interpretation of Seneca’s depiction of Helvia as a woman who must ‘see herself as a man sees himself’, see Gunderson 2015: 88–104.
Roman women, idealized figures that Helvia can imitate to further fortify her self-esteem.

Seneca’s own persona within the consolation as one who shows great courage in exile can provide an idealized other for Helvia, but Seneca also embeds in the consolation others towards which Helvia can strive and with whom she can experience a sense of merger. He, for example, suggests that Helvia follow the example of Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, who would not permit her weeping friends to continue bemoaning the loss of her sons, since she felt she was extremely fortunate to have had such sons in the first place. Helvia could also follow the example of Rutilia, mother of Cotta, who was so devoted that she followed her son into exile. Nevertheless, when Cotta died, she did not mourn him uselessly despite her obvious devotion (Helv. 16.6–7). Like Aeneas and Marcellus, model exiles for Seneca, Cornelia and Rutilia are ideal images of the kind of mother Helvia should emulate.

Finally, Seneca’s depiction of Helvia as a kindred spirit with whom he used to converse and engage in the study of philosophy (Helv. 15.1 and 17.3) can serve Helvia’s own need to experience a feeling of similarity to and connection with others, but Seneca also encourages his mother to turn to other family members for this sense of connectedness and belonging. Helvia can, for example, turn to and care for her granddaughter Novatilla, whose mother has recently died (Helv. 18.7–8). Noting that Novatilla is at a formative age, one in which ‘teachings penetrate more deeply’, Seneca encourages his mother to converse with her granddaughter, to mould her, saying, ‘you will give much to her, even if you give her nothing except your example’ (Helv. 18.8: ‘multum illi dabis, etiam si nihil dederis praeter exemplum’). Seneca also reminds his mother that she still has a father (Helv. 18.8) and sister (or sister-in-law, Helv. 19.1–7), who has been a mother to them all, on whom she can depend and look to for a feeling of similarity and belonging, and who depends on her in return. Thus Seneca provides his mother with a set of parental figures to whom she can turn when he himself is not available in person to provide for her need for connection. Most importantly, however, Seneca creates a portrait of Helvia’s sister that emphasizes the depth of the emotional relationship between these two women. Echoing the interconnection of wound between mother and son at the beginning of the ad Helviam, Seneca describes here the mingling of tears of the two sisters and creates a sensual picture of Helvia breathing again in the arms of this sister (Helv. 19.1–2), as though she were a crying newborn baby held by her mother. Following this image of the two women physically intertwined in an embrace, Seneca provides a detailed account of this sister’s many exceptional qualities and deeds: her nursing of Seneca in illness, her support of his quaestorship, her recovery of her husband’s body after a shipwreck, and her faultless behaviour as a governor’s wife in Egypt. This sister, as Seneca portrays her, is the ideal selfobject to help Helvia fulfil her need for a sense of connectedness and belonging. This sister has already proven that she has the requisite skills to rescue the ‘dead’, whether her husband’s body from the sea or her sister’s self from the pain of ‘mourning’ a lost son.

VII. Seneca (and Helvia?) reborn!

Seneca ends the ad Helviam on a note of tremendous triumph, reiterating his plan to spend the leisure and freedom of thought provided by exile to study nature and its laws. In a further

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19 See also Claassen 1996: 587–88.

20 G. D. Williams (2006: 173) also discusses the consolation in triumphalist terms; he writes: ‘The (paradoxical) end-result is that it is the liberated exile who, in the ad Helviam, is empowered to renegotiate Rome’s place in the world; and in this respect the ad Helviam offer important self-protection (or a form of spiritual detachment)
aggrandizement of his plans, Seneca shifts his gaze from land and sea to sky and the divine heights beyond, where his mind, surely not that of a ‘dead’ man, enjoys the ‘most beautiful spectacle of the divine, and remembering its own immortal nature marches forward to all that was and will be through all the cycles of time’ (Helv. 20.2: ‘pulcherrimo diuinorum spectaculo fruitur, aeternitatis suae memor in omne quod fuit futurumque est uadit omnibus saeculis’). Seneca is, at the end of his consolation, recreated, ‘reborn’, like the proverbial phoenix of mythology, regenerated from the ashes of exile. Through his study of nature, he is also well on his way to becoming one of the Sirens of the Odyssey, knowledgeable of the past and the future and ‘singing’ a siren song to Helvia, his mother, that invokes ideal figures from the historical and more recent past to inspire her in the coming years. She, too, through Seneca’s consolation, now has the selfobjects she needs to recreate a whole self out of her current self, diminished by bereavement — a revitalized, unified, and cohesive self of her own, able to face the future happier and more blessed. A self is not created alone or in a vacuum. A self is created and recreated by others. A self is ‘born’ and ‘reborn’ because of others. And, especially under an oppressive regime, one will need trustworthy others, friends, family, to forge and reforge the multitude of selves necessary for survival. But, when real-life others are lacking, images of others can sometimes do the trick. They do for Seneca and Helvia, who, indeed, triumphantly rise again. And again.

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for any Roman, whether a metropolitan “insider” or a political exile, from the vagaries of life under the likes of Claudius and then Nero.’