

## **Molly PASCO-PRANGER**

### ***Vitium senectutis*: aging, masculinity, and morality**

This paper explores the intersection of Roman discourses of aging, morality, and gender, beginning from the preface to Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae*, which famously draws parallels between Seneca's own bodily decline and failing memory and the decline of morality generally and oratory in particular (cf. Sussman [1978] 66-68). Seneca's picture of the *desidiosa iuventus* of his day in its immorality and femininity echoes his description of his own aging body and mind and brings both the old man's masculinity and his potential as a moral agent into question.

From the Senecan preface, I turn to a broader contextualization of the problem. The practice of philosophy and the exercise of virtue, though recommended to all elite Roman men, are marked by our sources as the particular domain of older men. The wisdom of experience, the lessening of the desires and ambitions that muddle young minds, and the leisure granted to older men by their withdrawal from active political life all contribute to their potential excellence in virtue (e.g., Sen. Ep. 26.2-3, 68.12). These same virtues, however, run the danger of eliding with the feminizing "vices" that have received a good deal of attention in recent work on Roman discourses of gender and masculinity (e.g. Williams [1999] 125-159; Edwards [1993] 63-97). The old man's *otium honestum* easily slides into the inertia and *desidia* with which morally lax and soft young men are charged (cf. Parkin [1998] 28-30). The softness and mildness of an old man's life shares descriptive terms with the bodily *mollitia* of the effeminate man. An old man's moral *patientia* even shares a name with the *patientia* of a sexually passive male.

Cicero's *De Senectute* and the letters and essays of Seneca the Younger, central Roman philosophical texts defending old age and establishing its special claim to virtue, demonstrate a strong cultural association of bodily strengths with the masculine young, and mental or spiritual strength with the masculine old. Nonetheless both authors use the same sort of lexical pattern associating old age with passivity and femininity that we see in Seneca the Elder and show traces of anxiety about that association.

I suggest that these authors do not have language available to think about the "softening" of their own bodies and characters which is not tinged with femininity and moral condemnation. The Roman discourse on the "gentle" virtues of *clementia*, *mansuetudo*, *lenitas* tends to define them as a willed control of the power to be angry, severe, harsh in punishment; as virtues they are thus inextricably tied up with masculine active power (cf. Sen. Cl. 2.3.1). The collocation of these virtues with bodily softening and weakening and the gradual separation from power that accompanied old age for Roman elite men (Dixon [1992] 153-57; Parkin, *passim*) made them all too likely to shade into "vices".