



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Aliquid and mores : the prefaces and epilogues of Seneca's Naturales Quaestiones

Limburg, F.J.G.

Citation

Limburg, F. J. G. (2007, May 31). *Aliquid and mores : the prefaces and epilogues of Seneca's Naturales Quaestiones*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12081>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12081>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have focused on the prefaces and epilogues of the *Naturales Quaestiones*, analyzing form and content of these mainly moralizing passages. In this conclusion, I will give an overview of the main results obtained in the different chapters, and add some general reflections.

In Chapter 1, I examined the ancient and modern literary theory concerning prefaces, epilogues, digressions and transitions. In general, the function of classical prefaces (and epilogues) was related to the main text, for instance explaining its importance, or, in more general terms, placing the work in a broader context. However, a few *testimonia* from antiquity show that in certain genres at least, a preface (or epilogue) could also be a separate piece of writing, more or less unrelated to the main text. After following a development of its own, this kind of preface was then finally linked to the main text. Digressions, too, could be more closely related to the content of the main text, or function as separate developments inserted for the pleasure of the reader, for instance. Regarding transitions, which ancient literary theory requested to be 'smooth', ancient authors seem, in certain genres, to have had the tendency to use clear, explicit formulations such as found in the *Naturales Quaestiones*.

In this chapter, I also placed the *Naturales Quaestiones* in the context of ancient works belonging to the genres of didactic poetry and technical prose, and similarly composed of a technical main text together with non-technical passages. A passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (15.75ff.), in which Ovid imitates and parodies the combination of moralizing passages (to some extent) related to a scientific main text, has provided interesting evidence. Ovid's parody shows that Seneca was not the only one to attempt to combine ethics and physics in works of natural philosophy, and that the moralizing passages of such works contained stylistic characteristics and themes (such as the description of the gradual decadence of human *mores*) that also occur in the *Naturales Quaestiones*.

In Chapter 2 the *Naturales Quaestiones* was placed in a philosophical context. I have shown that in antiquity the relationship between ethics and physics was a matter of discussion – a debate that is particularly visible in a passage from Cicero's *De republica* (1.15ff.), and finds an echo in the disagreement within modern scholarship about the role of physics in Stoic ethics. In antiquity, opinions differed as to the relevance of the study of physics, i.e., the question whether this area of study could claim to have a moral and/or practical goal. For instance, some people recognized that it sharpened the mind for greater questions – but no more than that. In Hellenistic philosophy, the belief that natural philosophy had a moral relevance was vivid, even though this idea does not seem to have been concretised.

Several of the ideas that come up in this discussion also occur in the *Naturales Quaestiones*. Seneca clearly believed in the moral relevance of some activities that fall outside the scope of ethics proper. At the same time, the scientific discussions in the *Naturales Quaestiones* also have a goal of their own. Indeed, as I have argued, the work must be placed in the context of natural philosophy. In this genre, distinct from the natural sciences, philosophers investigated the causes of natural phenomena in accordance with their convictions about the universe.

In Chapter 3, I have attempted to explain the nature of the prefaces and epilogues in the *Naturales Quaestiones*. From Seneca's work it is clear that he particularly valued a kind of philosophy that aimed at achieving a practical effect: for instance, philosophy should bring people in such a state of mind that even the avaricious would proclaim a hatred of money. This aim was supported by a hortatory, repetitive form of text, devoid of intricate argumentations. Although written philosophical work allows for a wider range of philosophical texts, this hortatory writing can certainly be discerned, too. Thus, in my opinion the prefaces and epilogues of the *Naturales Quaestiones* belong to the parenetic part of philosophy. They contain *adhortationes*, *dissuasiones* and *consolationes*, which are mentioned in *Epistulae Morales* 94-95 as subdivisions of this part of philosophy: genres aiming at repeating familiar information in such a way that people become convinced of it. The scientific discussions of the *Naturales Quaestiones*, on the other hand, do not belong to this form of philosophy: this difference, in content as well as in style, between the various parts of the work is for instance also found in Lucretius' *De rerum natura*.

Besides hortatory texts, exercises such as a daily introspection of the soul were also part of the practice of philosophy. Important thoughts had to be incorporated in a person's mind by repetition, for instance by the repetition of *sententiae*, which abound in Seneca's work. In some passages of Seneca's work the idea also appears that the description of a vice with its full force or detail helps to combat that vice. This is important information, since it provides an explanation for Seneca's descriptions of vice in the context of his philosophical teachings: they should be understood as apotreptic texts.

In Chapter 4 we saw that the first paragraphs of the preface of *NQ* 3 contain basic prefatory themes: the presentation of the work, its importance and difficulty, accompanied by a sense of humility on the author's part. For a large part, the discussion of this preface revolved around the question whether it could have functioned as the original preface of the entire work; I have argued that the presentation of the work contained in this text and the awareness of the prefatory tradition, two elements not found in the other prefaces, are arguments in favour of this hypothesis. In this preface, Seneca also presents his undertaking in terms of morals: he speaks about the attention the mind will have for itself, and the fact that it is preferable to concern oneself with ethics rather than with the worthless activity of historiographers. It is clear that the author presents his inquiry into the causes of natural phenomena under a moral aspect.

In the preface of *NQ* 3 we also find a moralizing passage of a general nature, concerned with major themes of Seneca's moral philosophy: the workings of fortune and the attitude one should have in life. My analysis of this text has shown its commonplace nature: it could be replaced by any such passage elsewhere in Seneca's work. The passage was written so as to impress a message on the reader or listener – the function of philosophy as described in Chapter 3. As Seneca indicates in *Epistulae Morales* 64, in an account of the reading of a philosopher he admires: a text like this is meant to put the audience in such a state that it feels ready to attack fortune.

The end of *NQ* 3, discussed in Chapter 5, differs from the other epilogues of the *Naturales Quaestiones* in that it is an inquiry into the causes of the flood that ends the world at specific times. The representation of the flood has been analysed in the

light of the Stoic theory on the conflagration: Seneca seems to combine this theory with the tradition of representing a flood that is found in other texts. I have shown that the passage is clearly linked to the central inquiry of the book concerning the origin of the water of rivers and the sea: in both cases, the four elements and their interrelations form the basic explanation of the question under discussion.

However, certain features of the passage also link it to the other epilogues: these are the moral element present in the background of the description, and the dramatizing representation of the flood, which is achieved by means of the same rhetorical techniques as we find in the descriptions of moral decadence in the *Naturales Quaestiones*.

Although Seneca gives a dramatized description of the flood, I have argued that he also presents it as a neutral occurrence, a standard part of the fabric of the world. Unlike his stance in the discussion of earthquakes (*NQ* 6.3), Seneca does not dissociate the occurrence of the flood from divine action. Concerning earthquakes he argues that these phenomena have ‘causes of their own’, and are not the result of the gods’ wrath. Such a distinction, which ancient philosophers made more often in connection with (harmful) natural phenomena, also has its place in a world view such as that of the Stoics, where certain things happen out of necessity without infringing on the idea of providence.

The preface that is dealt with in Chapter 6, the preface of *NQ* 4a, has a remarkable form and content. It is an independent piece of writing, in which one subject, flattery, is developed at some length, after which a transition is made to the central discussion of the book. Seneca’s discussion of flattery has a non-theoretical, exemplary character, and strong rhetorical characteristics such as the use of paradox. The preface is written in the form of a letter, a fact I have related to the tradition of writing epistolary prefaces in antiquity. In its epistolary characteristics and its theme, the preface resembles the *Epistulae Morales*. Lucilius, Seneca’s addressee, is more visible in this passage than in the other moralizing passages of the *Naturales Quaestiones*. In the *Epistulae Morales*, Lucilius seems to play a part in helping to introduce a topic, and often gives way to an undetermined second person singular, the character of ‘the student’. I have argued that the manner in which Lucilius appears in the *Naturales Quaestiones* confirms the idea that he functions as a literary tool.

In Chapter 7, three moralizing epilogues are regrouped. The epilogue of *NQ* 4b, in which Seneca questions and defends his undertaking in the *Naturales Quaestiones*, led to a discussion of the position of physics in relation to ethics in Seneca's thought. While ascertaining the importance of the moral goal of every occupation, Seneca also defends the utility and grandeur of the study of physics. I have argued that the presence of moralizing passages in the *Naturales Quaestiones* may be explained from the idea that some moral lesson should be deduced from every occupation.

The idea of moral decadence, coupled with an increase in luxury, occupies an important place in the *Naturales Quaestiones*. In this chapter, I have characterized the idea of moral decadence and increasing luxury as a fixed thought pattern that was imposed on reality in antiquity, an idea that was based in factual information but also wilfully exaggerated the facts. Even though it was a well-known commonplace, the idea of decadence was still believed to function as a moral incentive.

The description of table luxury in *NQ* 4b 13, detailing the gradually developing abuse of snow at dinners, has been studied as an example of Seneca's development of a moralistic subject. I have analyzed the literary aspect of the description (its rhetorical characteristics, Seneca's use of semi-medical terminology), and the place of the subject within the Roman moralistic discourse. The fact that such descriptions occurred more often, for instance in the parallel treatment of table luxury in satire, is of importance for a correct understanding of Seneca's account.

The epilogue of *NQ* 5 forms a long *vituperatio* against man's foolish misuse of a gift of nature, navigation, for the purpose of going to war in foreign countries. This is another hortatory text with a high level of rhetoric and repetition, meant to convey a simple message. In this epilogue, it is particularly clear how concluding *sententiae* rephrase the lesson in such a manner that it can easily be memorized. I have analyzed this passage in the broader context of the different views on navigation (and, by extension, on the position of mankind in the world) that existed in antiquity: in some texts, man was not allowed such sacrilegious feats as the crossing of the ocean, whereas in other texts navigation was presented as one of the uses of technology destined for man. Seneca's version combines the positive idea of the achievements nature has made possible for man with the negative element of

man's misuse of this possibility. The strongly pessimistic character of this text is emphasized by a comparison with Book 3 of Cicero's *De natura deorum*, which shows that Seneca's complaint resembles that of the opponents of Stoic philosophy. These argued that god had not provided adequately for mankind, since his 'gifts' could be misused: it would have been better if these gifts had not been made. In the course of the epilogue, Seneca uses the Stoic answer to react to this reproach: the correct use of a 'gift of nature' was man's responsibility. It is because of the strongly rhetorical text, which has the character of a lament, that greater emphasis is put on the idea that man should never have been allowed to navigate.

Questions about the reason for and meaning of Seneca's descriptions of vicious behaviour arise especially from the epilogue of *NQ* 1, with its description of an extreme case of human depravity: the sexual perversity of Hostius Quadra. In my opinion, this passage may be best understood in the context of apotreptic teaching, as discussed in Chapter 3. A reading of the passage reveals that Seneca uses several recognized rhetorical means, such as the procedure of indirect amplification, in order to emphasize Hostius Quadra's badness. The detail and vividness of the description are characteristics of rhetorical *evidentia*.

In the final chapter of the book, Seneca describes how mirrors ought to be used, and how they gradually came to be wrongly used, for purposes of luxury. In his contrast of the primeval, virtuous generations that did not need mirrors with the generation of his contemporaries who indulge in the vicious usage of this object, elements of good and bad behaviour are clearly distinguishable: they constitute Seneca's moral lesson.

Several theories have been formulated by modern researchers as to the composition of *NQ* 1. Some researchers consider the scientific discussion of the book to have a metaphorical meaning related to the content of preface and epilogue. For instance, whereas the preface refers to a divine light and the epilogue to bestial immorality, the main text is thought to represent the area of distorted lights, and that of humanity, in between the divine and the bestial. Some interpretations also link the two moralizing passages in the book in the same terms. I myself have argued against such interpretations.

In Chapter 8, discussing the *consolationes* of the *Naturales Quaestiones* (the preface and epilogue of *NQ* 6 and the epilogue of *NQ* 2), special attention was paid

to the preface of *NQ* 6. My analysis has revealed the grand consolatory argumentation this preface contains: Seneca begins with a description of death by earthquake as the most fearful kind of death, then proceeds to argue that every manner of death is equal (and should not be feared). Next, he says that many forms of death should be feared more than death by earthquake, and concludes with the idea that it is preferable to die in an earthquake, since this is a grand way of dying. The initial amplification of the fear for which consolation will afterwards be offered appears to have been more usual in a consolatory context, as is especially clear from the comparison with the description of the fire of Lyons in *EM* 91. I have shown that the preface consists of consolatory commonplaces that have been effectively selected and arranged. The presence of commonplace ideas is understandable in the context of a genre that aims at convincing people of basic ideas (e.g., 'death should not be feared').

I have also related the exercise of *praemeditatio* to the preface: this exercise consisted in presenting to oneself all the evil that could possibly happen, so as to be able to react more appropriately to a disaster when it actually happened. Seneca's emphasis on the idea that earthquakes occur anywhere and anytime should be understood in this context: the realization that earthquakes may happen at any place or time should fortify people in case an earthquake occurs.

In the epilogue of *NQ* 6, commonplace consolatory thoughts are used to argue against fear of death in a general sense rather than against the specific fear of death by earthquake. The question in how far such texts as the consolations of the *Naturales Quaestiones* may be explained in the context of the idea of meditation on death was raised. The strongly rhetorical and repetitive character of the consolations corresponds to the concept of meditation; it has been suggested that the texts could have functioned as starting points for meditation.

In the chapter discussing the end of *NQ* 7, Chapter 9, we have seen, as in the discussion of *NQ* 5, that Seneca's highly rhetorical manner leads to biased representations of certain ideas in a text. Seneca's most conspicuous statement in *NQ* 7.30 is that god cannot be known. Upon closer investigation, this statement appears to be a dramatization of the fact that he cannot be *seen*. Seneca considers knowledge of god in the context of his discussion of the comets, divine phenomena that were hardly known: god, the divine *per se*, must not be known at all. The belief

in the progress of science that is expressed in this book confirms the idea that the pessimism concerning man's possibility to achieve knowledge is not absolute.

I have further clarified the nature of Seneca's statements by some additional evidence. For ancient philosophers, invisible things, *obscura*, formed one category of objects of knowledge. In this epilogue, Seneca for a moment takes a pessimistic view on this form of knowledge. He appears to stand in a tradition of natural philosophers who when they encountered some particularly difficult subject in their research exclaimed that 'nothing could be revealed'. Different views were taken on the study of the heavens in antiquity: sometimes this knowledge was said to be within the reach of men, but sometimes the daring character of the inquiry into superhuman matters was emphasized.

The epilogue is concluded by a moralizing passage that moves from the idea of a progress in science to that of a stagnation in philosophy and science, and a 'progress' in vice. Seneca's rhetorical representation of moral decadence is, again, clearly visible in this passage.

In the chapter discussing the preface of *NQ* 1, Chapter 10, we have seen that, next to a belief in the moral effect of the study of physics, Seneca also sometimes expresses the idea that moral improvement is the necessary precondition for an elevation of the mind to the heavenly sphere. The main focus in the preface is on this image of a 'flight of the mind': the mind ascends to its divine origin and contemplates the world from there. In its contemplation the mind learns to despise earthly possessions: Seneca's representation has a clear moral aspect. The flight of the mind was a common philosophical image or concept, often found in classical texts. There has been some disagreement among researchers about the nature of Seneca's representation of the flight, and more precisely about the question whether it shows Platonic or Stoic characteristics. In my opinion, such characteristics are not discernible in Seneca's text. The image of the flight primarily served to represent the elevation of the mind in philosophical contemplation, and was especially appropriate to a description of the effects of the study of physics. In the preface to *NQ* 1, too, this is its function.

In the last part of this chapter, I have briefly discussed the nature of Seneca's representation of god. Some statements in *NQ* Books 7 and 1 give the impression of a Platonic representation of god, since the divine, described as entirely invisible

and all *ratio*, is found not to correspond to the cosmos as a whole but to its best part. However, a closer investigation of Stoic theology shows that the Stoic immanent god was also believed to be present, in a higher concentration, in the highest part of the world. The different ways in which Seneca represents god mirror the different aspects of the Stoic deity. It is noticeable that the 'elevated' representation of god occurs especially in the context of the discussion of heavenly phenomena in *NQ* 1 and 7.

Initially, I had expected that my research would reveal the *Naturales Quaestiones* as a unified and therefore well-composed work, in reaction to those scholars who had expressed doubts about this. My analysis happened to start with Book 7, so that my impression of the work was based on this book. However, the situation turned out to be more complex: it is clear that the several books that constitute the *Naturales Quaestiones* have not all been composed in the same manner. In Book 7, the idea of the divinity of the comets, which pervades the scientific discussion, is developed in the epilogue, and the moralizing passage that ends the book links the idea of a progress of science to that of scientific regression and 'progress' in vice. In other books, such as *NQ* 5, the epilogue is connected to the main discussion by the fact that it discusses the same natural phenomenon from a moral point of view. This is not the case for Book 4a, in which the development in the preface is not related to the subject of the main text (as far as we can ascertain for a book only partially preserved). The general character of the preface of *NQ* 3 may be explained by the fact that it introduces the entire work, whereas the phenomena discussed in *NQ* 7 lead to general reflections on the value of the study of physics in the preface of *NQ* 1.

The material discussed in Chapter 1 has shown how important it is to be aware of contemporary literary theory before imposing (whether consciously or not) one's own ideas about (for instance) literary unity on a work without verifying sufficiently if these ideas also apply to the period under discussion. Thus, it is important to realize that a passage such as the preface of *NQ* 4a need not be thematically related to the ensuing discussion of the Nile. In antiquity it was good literary practice to first develop a subject separately and then attach that passage to the main discussion.

Likewise, a preface may also be related to the main text in a more general way (for instance indicating its moral dimension) and still follow a development of its own.

Transitions have not been discussed as extensively as prefaces in this study. However, we saw that scholars have sometimes considered the transitions of the *Naturales Quaestiones* to have a 'formal' character, a verdict that has been issued with a negative undertone without verifying sufficiently if such a judgement should actually be applied to this kind of transition.

The *Naturales Quaestiones* has proved an exciting field for the study of questions concerning the unity or composition of a work. The more complex unitary interpretations that have been put forward for the *Naturales Quaestiones* we have seen especially in the epilogue of *NQ* 1. It is difficult to ascertain whether and to what extent such interpretations are justified. For instance, in the context of Seneca's thought *NQ* 5 is perfectly understandable as a scientific discussion on the nature and position of the winds, followed by a moralizing *addendum* on man's misuse of the possibilities offered by the winds. Such ideas as those recently expressed by Williams (2005), for instance, who relates the wild character of certain winds to the violence caused by man, add an extra dimension to the book, and thus would certainly seem to enrich it. However, not everyone will agree with Williams' interpretation, and other scholars will no doubt come up with other theories of the kind proffered by him. I myself have retained a strong scepticism towards such interpretations. This is not to say that, generally speaking, such interpretations may not be used in certain cases. However, one should recognize that the possibilities are not the same in each genre, and that it is helpful to strengthen one's interpretation by giving it a theoretical basis and placing it in a context, for instance that of a specific genre or the author's thought, as I have done with my line of interpretation. On the basis of these facts, I regard the *Naturales Quaestiones* as a more straightforward work than it is presented by scholars such as Williams.

Although we should consequently be careful not to seek too strong a unity in the *Naturales Quaestiones*, we should also be wary of seeing too little unity in the work. The author's intention certainly was to add a moralistic dimension to the discussion of natural phenomena. His belief in the moral value of the study of physics was shared by his contemporaries; even sceptical philosophers argued that the study of nature had a moral value.

I have spoken of moralizing *addenda*: it is not easy to understand how Seneca's repetitive and highly rhetorical text, and especially the long descriptions of human depravity in the prefaces and epilogues, could convey an effective moral lesson. The problematic aspects of such a method are most obvious in the account of Hostius Quadra's misdemeanour (*NQ* 1.16). This situation has led some researchers to search for different ways to understand Seneca's moralizing passages, for instance by opting for metaphorical interpretations.

In my opinion, both Seneca's own stylistic preferences and the parenetic character of his teachings have determined the form of the prefaces and epilogues. The parenetic aspect of Seneca's philosophy, as discussed in Chapter 3, provides a context in which the prefaces and epilogues may be understood. It is perhaps in the *consolationes* of the *Naturales Quaestiones* that the function of this kind of text is clearest. An exercise such as that of the *praemeditatio*, focusing on the visualisation of future disasters, is relatively well-documented and researched, and should clearly be related to the preface of *NQ* 6. The method of presenting a vice in all its grisly detail with the purpose of deterring people from it or creating awareness of its danger is less well-known. However, the idea of putting a vice or danger "before the readers' eyes" corresponds well to the details in Seneca's descriptions.

Certain ideas Seneca uses occur in a literary as well as a more philosophical context within classical literature. This is the case with the idea of a gradual moral decadence of humanity from a golden age onwards. The value of such a well-known, commonplace representation can be difficult to grasp. However, in the discussion of the epilogue of *NQ* 1 (Chapter 7), for instance, we have caught a glimpse of the manner in which this account could be understood in a philosophical context. Indeed, I have shown that the ideas on hairdressing formulated by Seneca in his description of the gradual introduction and increasing abuse of mirrors correspond to teachings expressed by other philosophers regarding the subject of hairdressing. By means of his descriptions, Seneca conveyed a lesson about right and wrong behaviour.

The parenetic character of the moralizing passages of the *Naturales Quaestiones* explains how exactly they differ from the scientific discussions. In the discussion of *NQ* 6, for instance, the demands of the consolatory passage lead to a specific treatment of the phenomenon discussed in the book. It seems that one may

indeed, to a certain extent, speak of a 'melange of genres' in the *Naturales Quaestiones*.

To conclude: the answer to the question of the unity of the *Naturales Quaestiones* will not be the same for each book. Generally speaking, we may say that on the level of the intention of the work we see ethics and physics combined, and (from a literary point of view) prefaces and epilogues that place the work in a greater context. Seneca is adding *aliquid ad mores*, putting his natural philosophy in a mainly moral context. When we look at the realisation of this intent, the 'unity' is less clearly discernible. Indeed, the prefaces and epilogues often follow a development of their own, and the moralizing *addenda* take the form of very specific moral adhortations and dissuasions, genres with their own characteristics. Thus, I hope to have shed some light on the nature of the elements composing the *Naturales Quaestiones* in this study.