



CSCP Support Materials for Eduqas GCSE Latin

Component 2: Latin Literature and Sources (Themes) Love and Marriage

Seneca: Changing morals

For examination in 2024-2026

Teachers should not feel that they need to pass on to their students all the information from these notes; they should choose whatever they think is appropriate.

The examination requires knowledge outside the text only when it is needed in order to understand the text.

The Teacher's Notes contain the follow:

- An **Introduction** to the author and the text, although students will only be asked questions on the content of the source itself.
- **Notes** on the text to assist the teacher.
- **Suggested Questions for Comprehension, Content and Style** to be used with students.
- **Discussion** suggestions and questions for students, and overarching **Themes** which appear across more than one source.
- **Further Information and Reading** for teachers who wish to explore the topic and texts further.

Seneca: *de Beneficiis* 3.16 – Changing Morals

Seneca discusses the decline of chastity and respect for marriage among women

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 BC – AD 65), known to us as Seneca the Younger, was a Stoic philosopher, and tutor and political adviser of the Emperor Nero. After being implicated in a plot against Nero, he was forced to take his own life. He was a prolific author, and among his many works were several philosophical treatises, including *de Beneficiis* (On Benefits). The subject of this work is the nature of benefits, gratitude and ingratitude, and various problems concerned with the giving and receiving of gifts and favours.

This extract contains a small section in which Seneca discusses the rising divorce rate and adultery among women, which he perceives as a sign of moral decline in first century Roman society. He reasons in the introduction which precedes this extract (3.16.1) that harsher punishments would only lead to greater levels of debauchery, as raising awareness of what other women do would only encourage yet more women to engage in this behaviour. In the extract itself (3.16.2-3) Seneca details the women's repugnant behaviour and lack of shame, using exaggeration (*hyperbole*) to portray the sense that this is a widespread problem among elite women in Roman society.

Some minor changes have been made to the original Latin word order.

Text

num iam ulla repudio erubescit, postquam feminae quaedam illustres ac nobiles non consulum numero sed maritorum annos suos computant et exeunt matrimonii causa, nubunt repudii? tamdiu istuc timebatur, quamdiu rarum erat; quia nulla sine divortio acta sunt, quod saepe audiebant id facere didicerunt. 5

num iam ullus adulterii pudor est, postquam eo ventum est ut nulla virum habeat nisi ut adulterum irritet? pudicitia argumentum est deformitatis. quam invenies tam miseram, tam sordidam, ut illi satis sit unum adulterorum par, nisi singulis divisit horas et non sufficit dies omnibus, nisi apud alium gestata est, apud alium 10

mansit? infrunita et antiqua est, quae nesciat matrimonium vocari unum adulterium.

Notes

1 num: although this text was not written as a speech, Seneca uses many rhetorical devices to strengthen his argument, starting with this negative interrogative (*surely no woman..?*) to influence his readers' thoughts from the beginning.

ulla: the use of this word (*any woman*) highlights that Seneca believes all women are engaging in what were then considered the shameful activities of frequent divorce and remarriage. Rome's women are leading the way with the city's moral decline and not one of them is blushing over it.

Seneca is of course exaggerating his assessment that all Roman women are engaging in adulterous affairs (*hyperbole*), but this is a common complaint of many authors at the time. The Emperor Augustus even went as far as introducing a series of laws which offered rewards to those who did their duty to society by getting married and having children, and dealt out punishments to those who refused to get married, or those who disrespected the marriage bond by having affairs. However, Latin love poetry also glamourised adultery, leading Augustus to exile one poet (Ovid) for writing a series of manuals on adultery. Augustus was also forced to exile his own daughter for engaging in such behaviour.

1-2 feminae quaedam illustres ac nobiles: Seneca here highlights that it is the distinguished noble women of Rome's elite class who are setting this example of immoral behaviour to the rest of the city's women.

2-3 non consulum numero sed maritorum annos suos computant: the Romans dated their calendars according to the two consuls who were elected each year. Seneca is implying here that Roman women now change their husbands so often, they keep track of the years not by the consuls in charge, but by the husband(s) they had.

3 exeunt matrimonii causa, nubunt repudii: a nice balanced phrase which describes the actions of Roman women in Seneca's eyes suggesting the inevitability of divorce after each marriage.

4 tamdiu...erat: the pairing of *tamdiu* – *quamdiu* here emphasises that Seneca feels fear (of shame) has gone now that divorce and remarriage are not unusual. The moral decline of Roman society is a common theme among Roman philosophers at this time, often centring on marriage and child-rearing, but also condemning the increasingly luxurious lifestyles of the Roman elite.

4-5 quia nulla sine divortio acta sunt: *acta (diurna)* were daily records of senate decisions. Here, Seneca probably exaggerates (*hyperbole*) in claiming divorce is so widespread that it is mentioned in every one.

5 **quod saepe audiebant id facere didicerunt:** Seneca blames the increased publicity and gossip surrounding divorce for inspiring other women to indulge in the same behaviour.

6-7 **num irritet?** With a second rhetorical question, Seneca builds an argument that declining respect for marriage has led to lack of shame for adultery. Indeed, he claims, adultery has become the primary relationship for women while husbands serve only to keep lovers frustrated.

6 **num:** Seneca repeats the opening of his first rhetorical question, inviting his readers to continue agreeing with him.

7 **nulla (...) nisi:** Seneca is exaggerating again here, trying to convince his readers that every woman in Rome is engaging in adultery. The alliteration of 'n' emphasises the expectation of a negative answer.

irritet: a key feature of the ideal Roman wife is that she should irritate no-one! Her role was to remain at home taking care of the household, and to provide her husband with legitimate children. Seneca's own wife Paulina was an excellent example of a loving and supportive wife who did not seek to overstep the boundaries of her role, and remained submissive and obedient to her husband (as far as we know). In his other written works, Seneca holds her up as an example of the perfect partner in marriage, in stark contrast to the women he mentions here.

7 **pudicitia:** a key word when describing the ideal Roman woman – this word makes an appearance as a signifier of womanly virtue on many epitaphs. Seneca highlights just how far Roman morals have fallen by using this same word as an attribute of an ugly woman who cannot find herself several lovers.

8 **tam miseram, tam sordidam:** the repetition of *tam* here (*anaphora*) with two different pejorative adjectives emphasises this disparaging judgement of Roman women who were unable to attract lovers. This contrasts with the viewpoint of the more traditional members of society who of course believed that no women should be taking lovers.

9 **satis sit:** the repetition of the *s* sound (*sibilance*) here (and with *miseram* and *sordidam*) mimics a disapproving hissing sound that people might make at the sight of these unattractive women.

9-10 **nisi (...) nisi:** more repetition (*anaphora*) which Seneca uses to strengthen the persuasive rhythm of his speech, trying here to persuade his readers that, in these debauched times, Roman women were being perceived as inadequate unless they were entertaining multiple lovers each day.

non sufficit dies omnibus: by delaying *omnibus* to the end of this clause, Seneca highlights that 'all' is probably a significant number of lovers –

extremely shocking to his conservative male readers who don't believe a woman should have any lovers.

- 10 apud alium (...) apud alium:** repetition with emphasis on the *a* sound (*assonance*) to highlight the multiplicity of lovers. This sentence (starting on line 8) is another rhetorical question used by Seneca to encourage his readers to feel his own sense of shock and disgust at the morally-repugnant and shameless behaviour of these women.
- 11 infrunita et antiqua est:** Seneca is being especially ironic here – he of course is socially conservative and thinks everyone should respect the bonds of marriage. He views traditional Roman morals as the ideal, not as old-fashioned.
- 11-12 quae nesciat matrimonium vocari unum adulterium:** the placement of *unum adulterium* at the end of this sentence draws the reader's focus to the behaviour which Seneca wishes us to condemn with this ironic punchline. Seneca seemingly ridicules those women who do not value affairs above marriage, in an attempt to provoke outrage among his (male) readers and raise their suspicions that their wives may also be indulging in such behaviour.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Read the entire text aloud, emphasising phrasing and word groups. Then re-read each line or couplet, asking leading questions so that the class comprehend the meaning of the Latin text. It may be desirable to produce a written translation once the students have understood the Latin

num iam ulla repudio erubescit (line 1):

- What does Seneca suggest women no longer feel embarrassed about?
- Is he talking about just one woman, or many?

feminae quaedam illustres ac nobiles (lines 1-2):

- What two things are we told about these certain women?

non consulum numero sed maritorum annos suos computant (lines 2-3):

- How do these women count their years (their age)?
- What alternative way of counting years does Seneca mention?

exeunt matrimonii causa, nubunt repudii (line 3):

- What reason does Seneca give for women to leave the house?
- What does he say is their purpose in getting married?

tamdiu istuc timebatur, quamdiu rarum erat (line 4):

- What does Seneca think women used to be afraid of?
- Why are they no longer afraid?

quia nulla sine divortio acta sunt (lines 4-5):

- What does Seneca say always mention divorce (i.e. there are none without divorce)?

quod saepe audiebant id facere didicerunt (line 5):

- What have Roman women learned to do?

num iam ullus adulterii pudor est (line 6):

- What do women no longer feel any shame about?

nulla virum habeat nisi ut adulterum irritet (line 7):

- What reason does Seneca give for a women to have a husband?

pudicitia argumentum est deformitatis (lines 7-8):

- What is chastity evidence of, according to Seneca?

quam invenies tam miseram, tam sordidam, ut illi satis sit unum adulterorum par (line 8-9):

- What two adjectives does Seneca use to describe the women who have only a few lovers?
- How many lovers does he say are enough for these women?

nisi singulis divisit horas et non sufficit dies omnibus (lines 9-10):

- How does Seneca suggest a woman might divide her time?
- Why might a woman need to see some lovers at night?

nisi apud alium gestata est, apud alium mansit (lines 10-11):

- How does Seneca propose a women might manage to see two different lovers?

infrunita et antiqua est, quae nesciat matrimonium vocari unum adulterium (lines 11-12):

- What alternative definition of marriage does Seneca give us?
- How does Seneca describe women who don't know that marriage is equivalent to having just one affair?

Questions on Content and Style

1. (lines 1-3) Who does Seneca blame for the perceived decline of morals among Roman women? How have they inspired this change in behaviour?
2. (lines 4-7) How does Seneca portray the idea that divorce is now prevalent in Roman society? Give 3 examples.
3. (lines 7-11) How has Seneca constructed this part of his argument to inspire shock and disgust among his readers?
4. (lines 11-12) How does Seneca contrast marriage and adultery here? What impact will this have on readers who consider marriage should be respected and adultery discouraged?
5. Who does Seneca blame in this text for the perceived decline of moral standards in Roman society? How does this compare to other texts you have read? Are women always responsible for adultery? (Tip: compare with Horace and his approach to 'wooing' a lover).

Discussion

Themes: adultery, marriage and fidelity, moral decline, divorce, chastity

Seneca seems to portray a complete breakdown of marriage and fidelity in first century Roman society. He believed it was a key sign of Rome's moral decline and a move away from traditional norms which would lead to Rome's eventual downfall. Why was it so important for women in particular to be faithful to their husbands? We know that Roman men could have many relationships with other women, including sex-workers and slaves. Do you think it was acceptable for men to expect their wives to conform to different standards of behaviour? Are there different expectations now?

Seneca blames 'distinguished and noble women' for the rise in adultery and divorce, as they are seen to set an example to women across Roman society as a whole. However, the lifestyles of the Roman elite were very different to those of the lower classes, and their marriage ceremonies could also be very different. To what extent do you think these elite women were responsible for these changes in behaviour?

Seneca's text clearly assigns women an active role in the conducting of their extra-marital affairs: he says they leave the house to find new husbands only in order to divorce later and find ways to fit in multiple lovers each day. However, Latin love poetry can give quite a different impression: Horace, for example, portrays women as objects to be conquered, and uses a crowbar to break down the doors of the lovers who had been locked up by their husbands. Do you think it is fair for Seneca to only blame women for the increase in divorce and adultery?

Seneca was not the only Roman who would have preferred a return to more traditional behaviour and greater respect for the marriage bond. The emperor Augustus introduced his marriage laws (in 18BC and 9AD) to encourage both men and women to get married and have more children. The laws were not successful and attracted much criticism from the Roman people. Why do you think this was?

Questions on the whole passage

1. Do you find Seneca's arguments to be convincing? How accurate do you think his portrayal of Roman behaviour is? Why do you think he makes his argument in this way?
2. Who do you believe to be responsible for the decline of moral behaviour in Rome? Does it surprise you that Seneca portrays women as the instigators of divorce and adultery, given that they had so little control over other aspects of their lives?

Further Information and Reading

The Cambridge Latin Course Book V Stage 38 on Roman marriage contains a detailed discussion in English. A digital version of this section can be found [here](#).

Teachers may wish to read up on Roman marriage ideals and expectations: [this article](#) provides a brief overview. The Augustan marriage laws of 17BC and 9AD were Augustus' attempts to outlaw adulterous relationships with severe punishments: further information can be found [here](#). The same website also has an article about the adulterous activities of the emperor's daughter Julia, and the punishment he inflicted upon her, and an article about divorce in the early and later empire.

The topic of Rome's social and moral decline was addressed by numerous authors at the time: Juvenal's Sixth Satire might provide interesting points of comparison when analysing how Roman men discussed women who refused to confine themselves to the traditional and limited role of a wife.

Resources used:

Griffin, M. (2013) *Seneca on Society: A Guide to De Beneficiis* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Griffin, M. and Inwood, B. (2011) *On Benefits: The Complete Works of Lucius Annaeus Seneca* Chicago: University of Chicago Press