

From *New Looks at Old Romans*

by Rose Williams

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 BCE–65 CE)



Seneca the Younger was the son of Seneca the Elder and the uncle of the poet Lucan. A Stoic philosopher, statesman and dramatist, he was tutor and later the advisor of the Emperor Nero. He exercised a good influence on Nero for a number of years. As Nero's mental health gradually deteriorated, Seneca was forced to commit suicide for alleged complicity in Piso's attempt to assassinate Nero. His views in his philosophical works led to a legend that he was a correspondent of the Apostle Paul.

Seneca the Younger was a major philosopher and dramatist of the early Roman Empire. He was criticized because his lavish lifestyle did not seem to be in accord with his Stoic principles, but many of his comments, including those about slaves, show a just and enlightened mind.

Seneca expresses great pleasure about his friend's treatment of his slaves as human beings. He discusses in this letter some of the humiliating treatment to which some slaves are subjected. He gives evidence that the early Romans treated slaves more honorably.

Moral Letters I.47 ON SLAVES

Part 1

Libenter ex eīs, quī ā tē veniunt, cognōvī familiārīter tē cum servīs tuīs vīvere. Hoc prūdentiam ērudītiōnem decet. “Servī sunt.” Immō hominēs. “Servī sunt.” Immō contubernālēs. Servī sunt.” Immō humilēs amīcī. “Servī sunt.” Immō cōservī, sī cōgitāverīs tantundem in utrōsque licēre fortūnae. Deinde eiusdem arrogantiae prōverbium iactātur, totidem hostēs esse quot servōs. Nōn habēmus illōs hostēs, sed facimus.

Vīs tū cōgitāre istum, quem servum tuum vocās, ex īsdem sēminibus ortum eōdem fruī caelō, aequē spīrāre, aequē vīvere, aequē mōrī! Tam tū illum vidēre ingenuum potes quam ille tē servum. Vīvē cum servō clēmēter, cōmiter quoque, et in sermōnem illum admitte et in cōsiliū et in convictum. Hōc locō adclāmābit mihi tōta manus dēlicātōrum: “Nihil hāc rē humilius, nihil turpius est.”

Nē illud quidem vidētis, quam omnem invidiam maiōrēs nostrī dominīs, omnem contumēliam servīs dētrāxerint? Dominum patrem familiae appellāvērunt, servōs, quod etiam adhūc dūrat, familiārēs. Īstituērunt diem fēstum, nōn quō solō cum servīs dominī vēscerentur, sed quō utique; honōrēs illīs in domō gerere, iūs dīcere permīsērunt et domum pusillam rem pūblicam esse iūdicāvērunt.

Comprehension Questions

1. What does *familiārīter* indicate about Seneca's friend and his attitude toward his slaves?
2. Who are *maiōrēs nostrī*?
3. What does Seneca say that they called a master?

Answers

1. He considers them family.
2. The ancestors of the Romans
3. They called him *pater familiae*, the father of a family

Vocabulary

adhūc *adv* up to now, still

arroganti•a -ae *f* arrogance

cael•um -ī *n* sky

cognōsc•ō -ere cognōvī cognitum to learn, recognize

cōmiter *adv* socially, in a comradely manner

cōserv•us -ī *m* fellow slave

contubernāl•is -is *m* tent companion, fellow being

contumēli•a -ae *f* insult

dec•et -ēre -uit to be proper to, to befit

dēlicāt•us -a - um *adj* dainty, pampered

ērudīti•ō -onis *f* learning, understanding

familiār•is -e *adj* family, familiar *m* a family member, close friend

familiārīter *adv* in a family manner, easily

fēst•us -a - um *adj* festive

fortūn•a -ae *f* fortune fate

fruor fruī fructum *dep w abl* to enjoy

ger•ō -ere gessī gestum to hold, wear

hon•or -ōris *m* position, office

host•is -is *f* enemy

iact•ō (1) to toss to, refer to

immō *adv* on the contrary

invidi•a -ae *f* spite

libenter *adv* gladly

lic•et -ēre -uit (it) is permitted, granted

maiōr•ēs -um *mpl* ancestors

moriōr mōrī mortuus *dep* to die

orior orīrī ortus *dep* to rise, be born

permitt•ō -ere permīsī permissum to permit, allow

prōverbi•um -ī *n* saying, proverb

pusill •a -ae *f* tiny, little

quot *indecl adj* so many, as many

sēm•en --inis *n* race, stock, origin

spīr•ō (1) to breathe

tantundem *adv* just as much

utique *adv* in particular, especially

vēsc• or - ī *dep w abl* to eat

volō velle voluī to want, wish

Part 2

“Quid ergō? Omnēs servōs admovēbō mēnsae meae?” Nōn magis quam omnēs liberōs. Errās, sī exīstimās mē quōsdam quasi sordidiōris operae reiectūrum, ut putā illum mūliōnem et illum bubulcum; nōn ministeriīs illōs aestimābō, sed mōribus. Sibi quisque dat mōrēs, ministeria cāsus adsignat. Quīdam cēnent tēcum, quia dignī sunt, quīdam, ut sint. Sī quid enim in illīs. ex sordidā conversātiōne servīle est, honestiōrum convictus excutiet. Nōn est, mī Lūcīlī, quod amīcum tantum in forō et in cūriā quaerās; sī dīligerter adtendēris, et domī inveniēs. Saepe bona māteria cessat sine artifice; temptā, et experiere. Quemadmodum stultus est, quī equum ēmptūrum nōn ipsum īnspicit, sed strātum eius ac frēnōs, sīc stultissimus est, quī hominem aut ex veste aut ex condiōne, quae vestis modo nōbīs circumdata est, aestimat. “Servus est.” Sed fortasse līber animō. “Servus est.” Hoc illī nocēbit? Ostende, quis nōn sit; ālius libīdinī servit, alius avāritiae, alius ambitiōnī, omnēs timōrī. Dabō cōn-sulārem aniculae servientem, dabō ancillulae dīvitem, ostendam nōbilissimōs iuvenēs mancipia pantomīmōrum! Nūlla servitūs turpior est quam voluntāria.

Diūtius tē morārī nōlō; nōn est enim tibi exhortātiōne opus. Hoc habent inter cētera bonī mōrēs: placent sibi, permanent. Levis est malitia, saepe mūtātur, nōn in melius, sed in aliud. VALĒ.

Comprehension Questions

1. How does *sibi quisque dat mōrēs* make this the best judge of a man?
2. *Amīcum domī inveniēs* indicates that slaves may become what?
3. What does *malitia* do?

Answers

1. He chooses his own morals; he does not choose his rank in life.
2. Friends
3. It constantly changes, but never into anything better.

Vocabulary

adsign•ō (1) to assign

aestim•ō (1) to consider, think

ambiti•ō -ionis *m* ambition

ancillul•a –*ae f* little serving girl

anicul•a –*ae f* little old woman

artif•ex -icis *m* artist, builder

avāriti•a –*ae f* greed

bon•us -a - um *adj* good **melius** better

bubulc•us –*i m* herdsman

cāsus casūs *m* chance

cess •ō (1) to stand still, lie fallow

circum•do -dare -dēdī -datum to surround, encircle

cōnsulāris -e *adj* consular *m* man of consular rank

conversāti•ō -ionis *f* conversation

convictus convictūs *m* association

cūri•a –*ae f* senate building

dīligerter *adv* carefully

dīv•es -itis rich, rich man

equ•us –*i m* horse

err•ō (1) to make a mistake

exhortāti•ō -ionis *m* encouragement

exīstim•ō (1) you think

exper•iōr -irī -tus *dep* to try, test

for•um –*i n* the marketplace

īnspici•ō –*ere inspēxī inspectum* to examine, inspect

lev•is -e *adj* light, light-weight

liber libera liberum *adj* free

libīd•ō -inis *m* lust

maliti•a –*ae f* malice, evil

mancipi•um –*i n* possession, property

māteri •a –*ae f* material

mūli•ō -ionis *m* mule driver

nōbil•is -e *adj* noble

noc•eō –ēre –uī –itum to show, tell

nōlō nolle nolūī to be unwilling

ostend•ō -ere –*i ostentum* to show

pantomīm•us –*i m* pantomime player

perman•eō –ēre –uī –itum to continue, remain

serv•iō -irē -ivī -itum to serve, to be a slave to

servī•is -e *adj* servile, slavish

servitus servitūs *m* slavery, servitude

sordid•us -a - um *adj* low, mean

tīm•or -ōrīs *m* fear

ut putā as for example

voluntāri•us -a - um *adj* voluntary

Seneca the Younger LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA (c. 4 BCE –65 CE)

Moral Letters I.47 ON SLAVES

Part 1

Gladly I learned, from those who come from you, that you live on friendly terms with your slaves. This is fitting for your good sense and your learning. “They are slaves,” (people declare). On the contrary, they are men. “They are slaves!” On the contrary, they are fellow beings. “They are slaves!” On the contrary, they are humble friends. “They are slaves!” On the contrary, they are our fellow-slaves, if you reflect that just as much power is granted to Fortune over both us and them. Finally, the saying is thrown to (alludes to) this same arrogance, “As many enemies as you have slaves.” We do not (just) have those enemies, but we make them. You want to remember (think) that man whom you call your slave, having sprung from the same stock, enjoys the same skies, equally (with yourself) breathes, lives, and dies. So you are as able to picture (see) him as a free-born man as he (is able to see) you as a slave.

Live with your slave kindly, even sociably; let him talk with you, plan with you, socialize with you. At this point the band of all the pampered will cry out against me; they will say: “There is nothing lower, more disgraceful, than this.”

Indeed do you not see that our ancestors removed all spite from the masters, all insults from the slaves? They called the master “father of the family,” the slaves, (which custom endures up to this day) “family members.” They established a festal day (the Saturnalia) when slaves might eat with their masters, not (on that day) only, but on that one especially; they permitted these to hold offices (official duties) and to say (give) judgments in the home, and they considered the home a tiny republic.

Comprehension Questions

1. Give three points on which Seneca feels that slaves and free men are alike?
2. How does he say the ancient Romans regarded slaves?
3. How does he say that the yearly festival of the Saturnalis was not unique?
4. What does he say the ancient Romans considered the home?

Answers

1. They both spring from the same seed, enjoy the same sky, live, breathe and die.
2. As members for the family.
3. It was only one of the times that masters honored slaves.
4. The home was a tiny republic.

Part 2

“What therefore,” (some say), “shall I move all the slaves to my own table?” No, not any more than all free men. You are mistaken if you think that I would bar (from my table) certain slaves whose duties are more humble; for example, that muleteer or that herdsman. I value them not according to their duties, but according to their character. Each man acquires his character for himself, but accident assigns his duties. Some may dine with you because they are worthy; others, so that they may be. If there is in them from low association something slavish, it will be removed by more honest associations. It is not, my dear Lucillus, only in the forum or in the Senate-house you may seek a friend; if you pay attention diligently, you will find them at home also. Good material often stands idle without an artist; try it, and you will find out. As much as he is a fool who, when purchasing a horse, inspects not the animal, but merely his saddle and bridle; so very stupid is he who values a man from his clothes or from his rank, which indeed is only a robe that clothes us.

“He is a slave.” But perhaps he is free in spirit. “He is a slave.” Does this injure him? Show (me), who is not a slave? one is a slave to lust, another to greed, another to ambition, and all are slaves to fear. I will show you an ex-consul a servant to a little old woman, a rich man who is slave to a serving-maid; I will show you youths of the noblest birth (who are) the property of pantomime players! No servitude is more disgraceful than that which is voluntary.

I do not wish to delay you longer; for you need no exhortation. Good character has this among other things: it pleases itself (in judgments) and remains steady. Evil is light-weight and is often changing, not into something better, but (merely) something different. Farewell.

Notes for On Slaves

As observed in General Notes, captured Roman slaves were often better educated than their masters. By the best of Romans they were accorded the respect due a human being, and more respect for their special talents. Seneca points out that at the ancient festival of the Saturnalia slaves sat at table and the masters waited table. This both harks back to the legendary Golden Age and reflects the Roman belief in the wheel of fortune, often referred to in Cicero and discussed in Seneca’s play *Agamemnon* “Whatever Fortune has raised on high, she lifts but to bring low.” Today’s master may well be tomorrow’s slave.

Comprehension Questions

1. How does Seneca say he chooses people to share a meal with him?
2. What two kinds of fool does he discuss?
3. What servitude does he say is disgraceful?
4. What happens to Evil?

Answers

1. He chooses by their character.
2. Those who judge a horse by his accessories and those who judge a man by his clothes and rank.
3. That which is voluntary.
4. Evil, being lightweight, constantly changes not into something better, merely into something different.