

Epistulae Morales

Moral Letters by Lucius Annaeus Seneca (ca. 4 BCE-65 CE)

Here is a brief biography of the author by Miriam T. Griffin.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca was born at Corduba (mod. Cordoba) in southern Spain between 4 BCE and 1 CE. He was born into a wealthy equestrian family of Italian stock, being the second son of the elder Seneca and Helvia; his brothers were L. Annaeus Novatus, later known as Iunius Gallio after his adoption by the orator of that name, and L. Annaeus Mela, the father of the poet Lucan. He was happily married to a woman younger than himself, Pompeia Paulina; the evidence for an earlier marriage is tenuous. He had one son, who died in 41.

He was brought to Rome by his mother's stepsister, the wife of C. Galerius, prefect of Egypt from 16 to 31. Little is known about his life before 41 CE. In Rome by 5 CE, he studied grammar and rhetoric and was attracted at an early age to philosophy. His philosophical training was varied. He attended lectures by Attalus the Stoic and by Sotion and Papirius Fabianus, both followers of Sextius who had founded the only native Roman sect a generation before: Seneca was to describe it as a type of Stoicism. It is not known when he met Demetrius the Cynic, whom he was to write about in his Neronian works. At some time he joined his aunt in Egypt, who nursed him through a period of ill health. About 31 he returned with her, survivors of a shipwreck in which his uncle died. Some time later, through her influence, he was elected quaestor, considerably after the minimum age of 25. By the reign of Gaius (Gaius Iulius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, "Caligula," emperor 37-41 CE), he had achieved a considerable reputation as an orator, perhaps also as a writer (if some of the lost works can be dated so early), and in 39, according to a story in Cassius Dio, his brilliance so offended the emperor's megalomania that it nearly cost him his life (political motives have been conjectured). In 41 under Claudius (Tiberius Claudius Nero Germanicus, emperor 41-54 CE) he was banished to Corsica for alleged adultery with Julia Livilla, a sister of Gaius, and remained in exile until 49, when he was recalled through the influence of the younger Agrippina and made praetor. He was appointed tutor to her son Nero, then 12 years old and ready to embark on the study of rhetoric. In 51 Burrus, who was to become Seneca's congenial ally and colleague during his years of political influence, was made prefect of the praetorian guard; and with Nero's accession in 54, Seneca exchanged the role of tutor for that of political adviser and minister.

During the next eight years, Seneca and Burrus managed to guide and cajole Nero sufficiently to endure a period of good government, in which the influence of his mother was reduced and the worst abuses of the Claudian regime, the irregularities in jurisdiction and the excessive influence and venality of the court, were corrected. Though he ensured that Nero treated the senate with deference, and was himself a senior senator, having held office as suffect consul for the unusual term of six months in 55 or 56, he did not regularly attend senatorial meetings. Nor is Dio's conception of his role as initiating legislation and reform plausible. Rather, as *amicus principis*, writing the emperor's speeches, exercising patronage, and managing intrigue, Seneca's power was ill-defined but real. His relatives received

important posts, as did the *equites* to whom he addressed most of his works. Seneca's reputation was tarnished by Nero's suspected murder of Britannicus in 55 and certain murder of his mother in 59. As Nero fell under the influence of people more willing to flatter him and to encourage his inclination to seek popularity through exhibitionism and security through crime, Seneca's authority declined, and his position became intolerable. In 62 the death of Burrus snapped his power, and Seneca asked to retire and offered to relinquish his vast wealth to Nero. The retirement was formally refused, and the wealth not accepted until later; in practice he withdrew from public life and spent much time away from Rome. In 64, after Nero's sacrilegious thefts following the Great Fire in July, Seneca virtually retired to his chamber and handed over a great part of his wealth. He devoted these years to philosophy, writing, and the company of a circle of congenial friends. In 65 he was forced to commit suicide for alleged participation in the unsuccessful Pisonian conspiracy; his death, explicitly modelled on that of Socrates, is vividly described by Tacitus (Ann. 15. 62-4) who, though sympathetic, clearly found it rather histrionic and preferred the ironic behaviour of Petronius a year later (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd Edition, 1996, 96).

Letter 27 (Book III.6) *Seneca acknowledges that while prescribing behaviour to Lucilius he is merely a fellow patient, talking to his friend as he would to himself. They should focus on lasting goods, particularly the mind's own good, virtue. Virtue cannot be delegated, as one ignorant man tried to delegate his literary culture to his slaves. Men must practise virtue for themselves.*

1. 'Are you giving me advice?' you say; 'Have you already advised and I corrected yourself? Is that why you are at leisure to set others straight?' I am not so persistent that I will seek out cures while I am sick, but I will talk to you about our common suffering and share remedies as if I am lying in the same hospital. So listen to me as though I am talking to myself: I will let you into my intimate thoughts and reckon up with myself in your company.
2. I keep rebuking myself: 'Count your years and you will be ashamed to want and plan the same things you wanted as a boy. In short, furnish yourself with this defence approaching the day of death; let your faults die before you. Send off those troubling pleasures which cost so dear; they are harmful not just as they approach but when they are past. Just as anxiety does not fade over crimes, even if they go undetected at the time, so regret for evil pleasures lasts even after them. They are not firm and reliable; even if they don't do harm they escape from you.'
3. Look around instead for some lasting good thing; but there is none except what the mind finds from and for itself. Only virtue guarantees continuing and carefree joy: even if something gets in the way, it is like clouds which are moved beneath the sky and never overcome the daylight.'
4. When shall it be my good luck to reach this joy? It is not lingering, but let it come on fast. There is a great deal of the task ahead on which you must spend your wakefulness and your effort if you want it to come about; this business does not allow for using deputies.
5. The nature of writing allows for another kind of assistance. Within our memory there was a wealthy man, Calvisius Sabinus, with the property and intellect of a freedman; I never saw a man more unworthy of his riches. His memory was so bad that he would forget the name sometimes of Ulysses, at other times of Achilles or Priam, whom he knew as well as we know our slave escorts. No ageing personal assistant who does not give men their proper names but imposes

others, ever greeted men by their tribe as badly as Calvisius misnamed the Trojans and Achaeans.¹

6. But he still wanted to seem educated. So he dreamed up this shortcut; 6 he bought slaves for a high price, one of whom knew Homer and another Hesiod, and besides, he allocated several others each to one of the nine lyric poets. Don't be surprised that he paid a great deal for them: he had not found them trained but commissioned their training. Once he had assembled this household he began to molest his dinner guests. He kept these slaves at his side, and whenever he was looking for the verses to quote he often dried up in the middle of a phrase.

7. Satelliuss Quadratus, that nibbler of wealthy fools and flatterer to go along with it,² and mocker, a role associated with the other two, urged him to hire grammarians to pick up the crumbs: when Sabinus said that each slave cost him 100,000 sesterces, he said: 'You could have bought as many book-cases of texts for less.' But Sabinus was of the opinion that he knew whatever any one in his household knew.

8. So Satelliuss began to exhort him to take up wrestling, although he was sick and pale and weedy. When Sabinus retorted: 'How can I, when I can hardly stay alive?', Satelliuss answered: 'Don't say that, please, don't you see how many stout slaves you have?' Good sense is not borrowed or bought; indeed, I think that if it were for sale it would not find a buyer; but bad sense is bought every day.

9. But now take my debt to you and fare well. 'Poverty adjusted to the law of nature is wealth.'³ Epicurus often says this in different ways, but anything that is never properly learned is never said too often: you need only show remedies to some men, but you have to force them into the minds of others. Keep well.

[Translation by Elaine Fanthem, 2010]

¹ The *Iliad* was the stock reading-matter of elite Roman boys, but Calvisius, like the uneducated Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyricon*, cannot even get his Homeric heroes straight. (Personal assistants served politicians by supplying the names of whomever they met in the forum.) Hesiod was much favoured for his moral maxims, but the nine lyric poets are far less likely to have been part of a Roman's repertoire, and the purchase of nine slaves, one for each poet, was surely added by Seneca to enliven the story.

² Seneca's account of this professional parasite includes two untranslatable puns on his greed and mockery. 'To pick up the crumbs' paraphrases a Greek term (*analektas*) for waiter; in elegant households slaves were (supposed to be) Greek-speaking and specialists had Greek designations. But grammarians too were often Greeks.

³ Epicurus, fr. 477 (Usener).

Letter 44 (Book V.3) *On the difference between social and moral standing. Seneca reproaches Lucilius for feeling socially inferior as a mere knight, and compares the moral nobility and humble social origin of Socrates and other great philosophers. References to movement between slavery and free status point ahead to the direct discussion coming in letter 47.*

1. You are belittling yourself to me again and saying that first nature, then fortune, has been grudging to you, although you can detach yourself from the crowd and rise to the greatest success among men. If philosophy has any merit it is this, that it does not look at the family tree: all men, if we trace them to their first origin, come from the gods.
2. You are a Roman knight,¹ and it was your enterprise that raised you to this rank; but by Jove, the fourteen rows shut out many and the senate does not let in everyone, and even military camps are selective in choosing whom they welcome into toil and danger: but good sense is open to all and we are all nobly born for this purpose. Philosophy does not reject or choose anyone; it shines for everyone.
3. Socrates was not a patrician;² Cleanthes drew water and hired his services to irrigate a garden; as for Plato, philosophy did not welcome him as a noble but made him noble; why should you despair of becoming their equal? All of these are your ancestors if you behave worthily of them; and you will do if you persuade yourself forthwith that you are not surpassed by anyone in nobility.
4. For all of us there are as many preceding us; there is no one whose origin does not lie beyond memory. Plato says that no king was not descended from slaves and no slave was not descended from kings.³ A long series of vicissitudes mixed up all of these ranks and fortune turned them upside down.
5. Who is well born? The man well set up by nature for virtue. We should look only for this, otherwise if you hark back to the old days there is no one who does not come from the time before creation. From the origin of the universe up to this time an alternating sequence has led us through glorious and humble circumstances. An entrance hall full of smoky wax masks⁴ does not make us noble; no ancestor lived in order to give us glory, nor is what occurred before us our property; it is the spirit that makes one noble, which may rise from any rank above fortune.
6. So imagine you are not a Roman knight but a freedman: you can achieve this, to be the only free man among the freeborn. 'How is that?' you say. If you do not distinguish between good things and bad on the people's say so. You must fix your gaze not on the origin of things but

¹ The second order at Rome, inferior only to the senatorial order, was called equestrian, because originally men of this property class served as cavalry officers (knights). They were privileged to sit in the front fourteen rows at the theatre. The Roman pyramidal hierarchy was of senatorial families, then equestrians or knights, then freeborn citizens: beneath them were the freedmen or former slaves, and below them only actual slaves; even among slaves, the home-bred *vernae* were deemed superior to slaves purchased in the market, and Greek-speaking slaves to 'barbarians'.

² Socrates was a craftsman (stonemason), but the word patrician, denoting a restricted birth-caste at Rome, is doing duty for the Greek concept of being *eupatrid*, 'of good father'. The Stoic Cleanthes apparently worked with his hands, but Plato was an aristocrat, so Seneca makes a different point; the word 'noble' originally meant 'well known', and only later denoted a man whose family had held high office.

³ Defeat in war turned queens like Hecuba, queen of Troy, and royal daughters into slaves who gave birth as concubines to children of Greek kings.

⁴ Families descended from Roman magistrates kept waxen death-masks of their ancestors in the formal atrium, and paraded them in aristocratic funerals.

their destination. If there is anything that can create a happy life, then it is good in its own right; for it cannot be distorted into evil.

7. So where is it that people go wrong, since everyone chooses a happy life? Because they mistake the means of happiness for the end, and actually flee it while they are seeking it. For although a firm freedom from care and unshaken confidence is the essence of a happy life, they gather reasons for anxiety, and not only carry burdens on the treacherous journey of life but drag them along; so they are always falling further behind from what they are aiming for, and the more effort they spend, the more they hamper themselves and are carried backwards. This happens to men hurrying through a maze; their very speed entangles them. Keep well.

[Translation by Elaine Fanthem, 2010]

Letter 47 (Book V.6) *On the proper treatment of slaves, and how to reform the cruel and insulting behaviour of bad masters at dinner. Seneca's chief arguments are that slavery is the product of chance, which any man can suffer, and that treating slaves with some respect both wins their good-will and brings moral improvement to master and slave.*

1. I was glad to learn from your messengers that you live on friendly terms with your slaves: this fits your good sense and education. 'But they are slaves!' No, they are men. 'They are slaves.' No: companions. 'They are slaves.' No: humble friends. 'They are slaves.' No: your fellow slaves, if you think that fortune has as much power over masters as well as slaves.

2. So I laugh at those who think it shameful to dine with their slave. Why laugh? Except that it is a most arrogant practice that surrounds the master with a crowd of standing slaves as he dines. He eats more than he can hold, and loads with great gluttony his belly bloated and unaccustomed to its function, so that he evacuates with more effort than he swallowed.

3. But the poor slaves may not even move their lips to speak: every murmur is disciplined with the rod and not even accidental sounds, a cough a sneeze a sob, escape blows: silence interrupted by any word is atoned for with a severe beating; for the whole night they keep standing, hungry and silent.

4. This is why those who are not allowed to talk in their master's presence talk about their master. But slaves who not only exchanged talk in front of their masters but with them, whose mouth was not gagged, were ready to offer their necks for their master and avert impending danger onto their own heads; they chattered at dinners but were silent under torture.¹

5. Then there is an equally arrogant proverb spread around, that we have as many enemies as slaves; we don't have them as enemies but make them so. For now I will pass over other cruel and inhuman practices, ways in which we abuse them not even as men but like beasts of burden. When we recline at dinner one of them wipes away our spittle, another is in waiting to gather the products of our drunkenness.

6. Another carves expensive birds:² guiding his skilled hand through their breasts and thighs with sure gestures, he cuts away slices, wretched man, living for this one task, to cut fowl elegantly, except that the fellow who teaches this art for men's pleasure is more wretched than the one who learns it of necessity.

7. Another, as winesteward, is dressed like a woman and struggling with his own growth to adulthood; he cannot escape boyhood but is dragged back and his appearance, already fit for military service, has been smoothed out, with the bristles pumiced away or completely plucked: he divides the night between his master's drunkenness and lust, as a man in the bedchamber and boy at the dinner party.

8. Another, entrusted with supervising the guests, keeps standing, poor fellow, and waits to see whom flattery and lack of control of appetite or tongue will call back the next day. Add the

¹ Under Roman law (as also in Athenian law) slaves' evidence was only acceptable if they had spoken under torture, and they could only be saved from this if their master manumitted them. Another law declared that if a master was killed at home all slaves of the household were to be executed as complicit in the crime.

² This specialization and many of the other details in this letter occur in the undisciplined household of the ex-slave Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyricon*: once he is drunk he even invites the cook and other kitchen slaves to share his dinner couch, throwing aside all decorum.

purchasers who have a detailed knowledge of their master's palate, who know what flavour will excite him, what food delights him by its appearance and what can rouse him by its novelty when he is feeling sated, what he now disdains from surfeit and what he is hungry for that day. He does not put up with dining along with these, and thinks it a derogation of his majesty to come to the same table as his slave — God forbid! How many masters he has among them.

9. I saw Callistus' former master standing at his door,³ and the man who had put a label upon him, and presented him among the lots at auction, shut out when others entered the house. The slave paid him back for being thrust into the first batch of sales on which the auctioneer tries out his voice; and he in turn made his excuses and did not think him worthy of his home. His master sold Callistus: but how much Callistus sold to his master!

10. Just think that the fellow you call your slave was born from the same seeds and enjoyed the same sky, breathed, lived, and died on equal terms! You are just as able to look on him as freeborn as he can look on you as a slave. In the defeat of Varus⁴ Fortune laid low many men of splendid birth aiming at the rank of senator through military service; it made one of them a shepherd, another a janitor. So now go and despise a man whose fortune you may descend to while you are despising him. I don't want to launch into that vast theme and discuss the treatment of slaves against whom we are most arrogant, cruel, and abusive. But this is the gist of my instruction; live with an inferior as you would wish a superior to live with you. Whenever it comes into your head how much you could do to your slave, think that your master could do as much to you.

12. But, you will say, 'I have no master!' You are still young; perhaps you will have one. You don't know at what age Hecuba began to be a slave, or Croesus, or the mother of Darius, or Plato or Diogenes.⁵

13. Live mercifully with your slave, even affably, and admit him to conversation and discussion and even shared living. At this the whole crowd of spoiled darlings will protest: 'Nothing would be more humble or shameful than this!' But I will catch the same men kissing the hand of another man's slaves.

14. Don't you even see how our ancestors removed all ill-will from masters and all insult from slaves? They called the master the Father of the Household,⁶ and the slaves, as is still the practice in mimes, they called Members of the Household. They established a feast-day not as the only day on which slaves ate with their masters, but as one day at least when they permitted the slaves to hold office in the household and hold court, and turned the house into a miniature commonwealth.

³ Callistus became a freedman of the emperor Claudius, and used his power to humiliate the private citizen who had been his earlier master. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, a former slave of Nero's freedman Epaphroditus, tells similar tales of reversals of fortune.

⁴ The destruction of a Roman army under Publius Quinctilius Varus in 9 CE by German tribes led by Arminius.

⁵ Like Hecuba (see note to 44.4 above), Sisygambis, mother of Darius, was technically the slave of Alexander, but he famously treated her with respect. Plato was captured by pirates and sold into slavery at Aegina, but ransomed by a former pupil. Diogenes of Sinope (cf. Diogenes Laertius, Book VI) was first exiled then enslaved; he advertised himself as expert in teaching his masters how to behave.

⁶ The Latin *paterfamilias* denoted the father figure as lord over both his freeborn descendent family and his slave familia.

15. So what? Shall I bring all my slaves to my table? No more than all free men. But you are mistaken if you think I will thrust away some as performing dirtier tasks, such as, for instance, the muleteer and cowherd. I will not value them by their services but by their character: each man provides his own character, but chance assigns his services. Let some dine with you because they are worthy and others to make them worthy; if there is anything slavish in them from their humble associations, dining with more honoured people will make them shed it.

16. Dear Lucilius, there is no reason to look for a friend only in the forum and senate-house: if you pay careful attention you will find them at home as well. Often good timber is wasted without a craftsman; try it and test it. Just as a man is a fool if he does not look at the beast itself when he is buying a horse, but at its saddle-cloth and bridle, so he is a real fool who assesses a man by his clothing or class, which is wrapped around us like clothing.

17. 'He is a slave.' But perhaps he is free in spirit. 'He is a slave.' Will this do him harm? Show me who is not a slave. One man is slave to lust, another to greed, another to ambition, all of us to hope and fear. I will give you an ex-consul enslaved to an old woman, a rich man to his maidservant, I will show you the most nobly born young men who have made themselves slaves of pantomime dancers;⁷ no slavery is more shameful than self-imposed slavery. So there is no reason for those disdainful men to discourage you from making yourself agreeable to your slaves and not arrogantly superior; let them be devoted to you rather than fear you.

18. Someone will say I am now calling slaves to take the cap of liberty, and casting the masters down from their heights, because I said 'let them pay respect to their master rather than fear him'. 'Just like that?' they say: 'You mean they should pay respect like clients, or morning greeters?' The man who says this forgets that what is enough for God is not too little for masters. The man who is paid respect is loved; love cannot be mixed with fear.

19. So I judge that you are acting with absolute correctness in not wanting to be feared by your slaves, and using only verbal scolding; only animals are corrected by blows. We are not harmed by anything that offends us, but self-indulgence drives people to frenzy, so that anything which does not answer their whim calls forth their rage.

20. We have put on the attitudes of kings; for they too, forgetful of their strength and other men's weakness, grow white-hot and rage as if they had been wronged, although their great fortune makes them very safe from any such risk. And they know this perfectly well, but by their complaints are waiting for a chance to do harm; they suffered harm so as to inflict it.

21. I don't want to delay you any longer, since you don't need encouragement. This is one of many other advantages of good character; it is content with itself and lasts. Badness is fickle and often changes, not for the better but for its opposite. Keep well.

[Translation by Elaine Fanthem, 2010]

⁷ These were the pop-singers of the Roman world, idolized by Maecenas, for example, whose lover was Bathyllus a pantomime, and taken as lovers, like Mnester and Paris, by empresses.