

# THE EPISTLES OF SENECA

## LXX.

SENECA LVCILIO SVO SALVTEM

- 1 Post longum intervallum Pompeios tuos vidi. In  
conspectum adulescentiae meae reductus sum. Quic-  
quid illic iuvenis feceram, videbar mihi facere adhuc  
2 posse et paulo ante fecisse. Praenavigavimus, Lucili,  
vitam et quemadmodum in mari, ut ait Vergilius  
noster,

Terraeque urbesque recedunt,

- sic in hoc cursu rapidissimi temporis primum pueritiam  
abscondimus, deinde adulescentiam, deinde quidquid  
est illud inter iuvenem et senem medium, in utriusque  
confinio positum, deinde ipsius senectutis optimos  
annos. Novissime incipit ostendi publicus finis  
3 generis humani. Scopulum esse illum putamus  
dementissimi; portus est, aliquando petendus, num-  
quam recusandus, in quem si quis intra primos annos  
delatus est, non magis queri debet quam qui cito  
navigavit. Alium enim, ut scis, venti segnes ludunt  
ac detinent et tranquillitatis lentissimae taedio lassant,  
alium pertinax flatus celerrime perfert.
- 4 Idem evenire nobis puta: alios vita velocissime  
adduxit, quo veniendum erat etiam cunctantibus,  
alios maceravit et coxit. Quae, ut scis, non semper

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<sup>a</sup> Probably the birthplace of Lucilius.

<sup>b</sup> *Aeneid*, iii. 72.

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### LXX. ON THE PROPER TIME TO SLIP THE CABLE

After a long space of time I have seen your beloved Pompeii.<sup>a</sup> I was thus brought again face to face with the days of my youth. And it seemed to me that I could still do, nay, had only done a short time ago, all the things which I did there when a young man. We have sailed past life, Lucilius, as if we were on a voyage, and just as when at sea, to quote from our poet Vergil,

Lands and towns are left astern,<sup>b</sup>

even so, on this journey where time flies with the greatest speed, we put below the horizon first our boyhood and then our youth, and then the space which lies between young manhood and middle age and borders on both, and next, the best years of old age itself. Last of all, we begin to sight the general bourne of the race of man. Fools that we are, we believe this bourne to be a dangerous reef; but it is the harbour, where we must some day put in, which we may never refuse to enter; and if a man has reached this harbour in his early years, he has no more right to complain than a sailor who has made a quick voyage. For some sailors, as you know, are tricked and held back by sluggish winds, and grow weary and sick of the slow-moving calm; while others are carried quickly home by steady gales.

You may consider that the same thing happens to us: life has carried some men with the greatest rapidity to the harbour, the harbour they were bound to reach even if they tarried on the way, while others it has fretted and harassed. To such a life, as you

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retinenda est. Non enim vivere bonum est, sed bene vivere. Itaque sapiens vivit, quantum debet, non  
 5 quantum potest. Videbit ubi victurus sit, cum quibus, quomodo, quid acturus. Cogitat semper, qualis vita, non quanta sit. Si multa<sup>1</sup> occurrunt molesta et tranquillitatem turbantia, emittit se. Nec hoc tantum in necessitate ultima facit, sed cum primum illi coepit suspecta esse fortuna, diligenter circumspicit, numquid ideo<sup>2</sup> desinendum sit. Nihil existimat sua referre, faciat finem an accipiat, tardius fiat an citius. Non tamquam de magno detrimento timet; nemo multum ex stilicidio potest perdere.  
 6 Citius mori aut tardius ad rem non pertinet, bene mori aut male ad rem pertinet. Bene autem mori est effugere male vivendi periculum.

Itaque effeminatissimam vocem illius Rhodii existimo, qui cum in caveam coniectus esset a tyranno et tamquam ferum aliquod animal aleretur, suadenti cuidam, ut abstineret cibo: "omnia," inquit, "homini, dum vivit, speranda sunt." Ut sit hoc verum, non omni pretio vita emenda est. Quaedam licet magna, licet certa sint, tamen ad illa turpi infirmitatis confessione non veniam. Ego cogitem in eo, qui vivit, omnia posse fortunam, potius quam cogitem in eo, qui scit mori, nil posse fortunam?

<sup>1</sup> *si multa* later MSS. ; *si (sit p) simulata* pVPb.

<sup>2</sup> *ideo* C. Brakman ; *illo* MSS. ; *illo die* Muretus.

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<sup>a</sup> Although Socrates says (*Phaedo*, 61 f.) that the philosopher must, according to Philolaus, not take his own life against the will of God, the Stoics interpreted the problem in different ways. Some held that a noble purpose justified suicide; others, that any reason was good enough. Cf. *Ep.* lxxvii. 5 ff.

<sup>b</sup> Telesphorus of Rhodes, threatened by the tyrant Lysimachus. On the proverb see Cicero, *Ad Att.* ix. 10. 3, and Terence, *Heauton.* 981 *modo liceat vivere, est spes.*

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are aware, one should not always cling. For mere living is not a good, but living well. Accordingly, the wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can.<sup>a</sup> He will mark in what place, with whom, and how he is to conduct his existence, and what he is about to do. He always reflects concerning the quality, and not the quantity, of his life. As soon as there are many events in his life that give him trouble and disturb his peace of mind, he sets himself free. And this privilege is his, not only when the crisis is upon him, but as soon as Fortune seems to be playing him false; then he looks about carefully and sees whether he ought, or ought not, to end his life on that account. He holds that it makes no difference to him whether his taking-off be natural or self-inflicted, whether it comes later or earlier. He does not regard it with fear, as if it were a great loss; for no man can lose very much when but a driblet remains. It is not a question of dying earlier or later, but of dying well or ill. And dying well means escape from the danger of living ill.

That is why I regard the words of the well-known Rhodian<sup>b</sup> as most unmanly. This person was thrown into a cage by his tyrant, and fed there like some wild animal. And when a certain man advised him to end his life by fasting, he replied: "A man may hope for anything while he has life." This may be true; but life is not to be purchased at any price. No matter how great or how well-assured certain rewards may be, I shall not strive to attain them at the price of a shameful confession of weakness. Shall I reflect that Fortune has all power over one who lives, rather than reflect that she has no power over one who knows how to die? There

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8 Aliquando tamen, etiam si certa mors instabit et destinatum sibi supplicium sciet, non commodabit<sup>1</sup> poenae suae manum; sibi commodaret. Stultitia est timore mortis mori. Venit qui occidat. Expecta. Quid occupas? Quare suscipis alienae crudelitatis procurationem? Utrum invides carnifici tuo an

9 parcis? Socrates potuit abstinentia finire vitam et inedia potius quam veneno mori. Triginta tamen dies in carcere et in expectatione mortis exegit, non hoc animo tamquam omnia fieri possent, tamquam multas spes tam longum tempus reciperet, sed ut praeberet se legibus, ut fruendum amicis extremum Socraten daret. Quid erat stultius quam mortem contemnere, venenum timere?

10 Scribonia, gravis femina, amita Drusi Libonis fuit, adulescentis tam stolidi<sup>2</sup> quam nobilis, maiora sperantis quam illo saeculo quisquam sperare poterat aut ipse ullo. Cum aeger a senatu in lectica relatus esset non sane frequentibus exequiis, omnes enim necessarii deseruerant impie iam non reum, sed funus; habere coepit consilium, utrum conscisceret mortem an expectaret. Cui Scribonia: "Quid te,"

<sup>1</sup> *commodabit* later MSS.; *commendabit* VPb; *commendavit* p.

<sup>2</sup> *stolidi* Torrentius; *solidi* MSS.

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<sup>a</sup> *i. e.*, if he must choose between helping along his punishment by suicide, or helping himself by staying alive under torture and practising the virtues thus brought into play, he will choose the latter,—*sibi commodare*.

<sup>b</sup> See the imaginary dialogue in Plato's *Crito* (50 ff.) between Socrates and the Laws—a passage which develops this thought.

<sup>c</sup> And to commit suicide in order to escape poisoning.

<sup>d</sup> For a more complete account of this tragedy see

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are times, nevertheless, when a man, even though certain death impends and he knows that torture is in store for him, will refrain from lending a hand to his own punishment; to himself, however, he would lend a hand.<sup>a</sup> It is folly to die through fear of dying. The executioner is upon you; wait for him. Why anticipate him? Why assume the management of a cruel task that belongs to another? Do you grudge your executioner his privilege, or do you merely relieve him of his task? Socrates might have ended his life by fasting; he might have died by starvation rather than by poison. But instead of this he spent thirty days in prison awaiting death, not with the idea "everything may happen," or "so long an interval has room for many a hope" but in order that he might show himself submissive to the laws<sup>b</sup> and make the last moments of Socrates an edification to his friends. What would have been more foolish than to scorn death, and yet fear poison?<sup>c</sup>

Scribonia, a woman of the stern old type, was an aunt of Drusus Libo.<sup>d</sup> This young man was as stupid as he was well born, with higher ambitions than anyone could have been expected to entertain in that epoch, or a man like himself in any epoch at all. When Libo had been carried away ill from the senate-house in his litter, though certainly with a very scanty train of followers,—for all his kinsfolk undutifully deserted him, when he was no longer a criminal but a corpse,—he began to consider whether he should commit suicide, or await death. Scribonia said to him: "What pleasure do

Tacitus, *Annals*, ii. 27 ff. Libo was duped by Firmius Catus (16 A.D.) into seeking imperial power, was detected, and finally forced by Tiberius to commit suicide.

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inquit, "delectat alienum negotium agere?" Non persuasit illi; manus sibi attulit nec sine causa. Nam post diem tertium aut quartum inimici moriturus arbitrio si vivit, alienum negotium agit.

- 11 Non possis itaque de re in universum pronuntiare, cum mortem vis externa denuntiat, occupanda sit an expectanda. Multa enim sunt, quae in utramque partem trahere possunt. Si altera mors cum tormento, altera simplex et facilis est, quidni huic inicienda sit manus? Quemadmodum navem eligam navigaturus et domum habitaturus, sic mortem exiturus e vita. Praeterea quemadmodum non utique melior est longior vita, sic peior est utique mors longior. In nulla re magis quam in morte morem animo gerere debemus. Exeat, qua impetum cepit; sive ferrum appetit sive laqueum sive aliquam potionem venas occupantem, pergat et vincula servitutis abrumpat. Vitam et aliis adprobare quisque debet, 13 mortem sibi. Optima est, quae placet. Stulte haec cogitantur: "aliquis dicet me parum fortiter fecisse, aliquis nimis temere, aliquis fuisse aliquod genus mortis animosius." Vis tu cogitare id in manibus esse consilium, ad quod fama non pertinet! Hoc unum intueri, ut te fortunae quam celerrime

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<sup>a</sup> When the "natural advantages" (*τὰ κατὰ φύσιν*) of living are outweighed by the corresponding disadvantages, the honourable man may, according to the general Stoic view, take his departure. Socrates and Cato were right in so doing, according to Seneca; but he condemns (*Ep.* xxiv. 25) those contemporaries who had recourse to suicide as a mere whim of fashion.

# END OF SAMPLE TEXT



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