

Seneca's Edible *Exempla*

"You are what you eat." (*es quod ēs*) - traditional

1. *quia longum iter est per praecepta, breve et efficax per exempla* (Ep. 6.5)

...since the journey is long through precepts, short and efficient through exempla.¹

2. *nos quoque aliquid et ipsi faciamus animose; simus inter exempla* (Ep. 98.13)

Let's do something courageous ourselves, too: let's be among these exempla!

3. *alio lectio ingenium et studio fatigatum, non sine studio tamen, reficit* (Ep. 84.1)

Reading nourishes one's character and repairs it when it's tired out from study, nevertheless not without study itself.

4. *non prodest cibus nec corpori accedit qui statim sumptus emittitur* (Ep. 2.3)

Food does no good, nor does it stick to one's guts, which, once taken in, is immediately vomited up.

5. *fastidientis stomachi est multa degustare; quae ubi varia sunt et diversa, inquinant non alunt* (Ep. 2.5)

It is characteristic of a weary appetite to taste many things; when these things are varied and diverse, they stain, they do not nourish.

6. *tantum degustare volui.... tamen exhausti totum* (Ep. 46.1)

I wanted only a taste... but I ended up gobbling down the whole thing.

7. *magnum exemplum nisi mala fortuna non invenit* (de Prov. 3.4)

Nothing, save for bad fortune, finds a great exemplum.

¹ All translations are my own.

8. **Manius Curius Dentatus:** *scilicet minus beate vivebat dictator noster, qui Samnitium legatos audit, cum vilissimum cibum in foco ipse manu sua versaret, illa, qua iam saepe hostem percusserat laureamque in Capitolini Iovis gremio reposuerat, quam Apicius nostra memoria vixit, qui in ea urbe, ex qua aliquando philosophi velut corruptores iuventutis abire iussi sunt, scientiam popinae professus disciplina sua saeculum infecit. (ad Hel. 10.8)*

Naturally our dictator must have lived less happily, who received the Samnite legates, when he was turning food of the cheapest variety over in his hearth by his own hand -- that hand with which he had by this time often struck the enemy and placed the laurel in the lap of Capitoline Jupiter, than Apicius lived, in our time, who in this city, whence the philosophers were formerly expelled on the grounds that they were corrupters of the youth, having professed knowledge of the cafe stained our age with his teaching.

9. **Gaius Fabricius Longinus:** *infelix est Fabricius, quod rus suum, quantum a re publica vacavit, fodit? Quod bellum tam cum Pyrrho quam cum divitiis gerit? Quod ad focum cenat illas ipsas radices et herbas quas in repurgando agro triumphalis senex vulsit? Quid ergo? Felicior esset, si in ventrem suum longinqui litoris pisces et peregrina aucupia congereret, si conchylis superi atque inferi maris pigritiam stomachi nausiantis erigeret, si ingenti pomorum strue cingeret primae formae feras, captas multa caede venantium? (de Prov. 3.6)*

Is Fabricius unfortunate because he tills his land, as much as he had leisure time from the state? Because he wages war as much with Pyrrhus as with wealth? Because he dines at his hearth on those very radishes and vegetables which he, an old man who had received a triumph, plucked while tidying his field? So what? Would he be happier had he heaped up into his stomach fish from a remote shore and foreign fowl, if he had roused the laziness of his sick stomach with shellfish from the highest and lowest part of the sea, if he had surrounded choice wild beasts, captured with much bloodshed from their hunters, with an enormous pile of fruit?

10. *quare autem non pondus adicio et aliquorum gulam inrito? quattuor pondo et selibram fuisse aiebant (Ep. 95.42)*

Why shouldn't I mention its [sc. the mullet sold by Tiberius] weight and excite the appetite of some people? They used to say it weighed four and a half pounds.

11. **Cambyses:** *sustinebant famem primo tenerrima frondium et cacumina arborum, tum coria igne mollita et quidquid necessitas cibum fecerat; postquam inter harenas radices quoque et herbae defecerant apparuitque inops etiam animalium solitudo, decimum*

quemque sortiti alimentum habuerunt fame saevius. Agebat adhuc regem ira praecipitem, cum partem exercitus amisisset, partem comedisset, donec timuit, ne et ipse vocaretur ad sortem. Tum demum signum receptui dedit. Servabantur interim generosae illi aves et instrumenta epularum camelis vehebantur; cum sortirentur milites eius, quis male periret, quis peius viveret. (de Ira 3.20.3-4)

At first the tenderest shoots and tree branches sustained their hunger, then animal skins softened by fire and whatever food necessity had furnished; afterwards, among the desert sands, roots and grasses too had failed them, and the desert appeared still to lack animals, having chosen each tenth man by lot they gained nourishment more cruel than hunger. To this point anger was driving the king headlong, since he had lost a part of his army, he had eaten another part, until he feared lest he himself might be called to the lot. Then, finally, he gave the sign for retreat. Meanwhile, choice birds were kept for him, and eating utensils were carried on camelback, while his soldiers were choosing by lot who would die badly, who would live even worse.

12. **Vedius Pollio:** *fregerat unus ex servis eius crustallinum; rapi eum Vedius iussit ne vulgari quidem more periturum: murenis obici iubebatur, quas ingentis in piscina continebat. Quis non hoc illum putaret luxuriae causa facere? saevitia erat. Evasit e manibus puer et confugit ad Caesaris pedes nihil aliud petiturus, quam ut aliter periret, ne esca fieret. (de Ira 3.40.2-3)*

One of his slaves had broken a crystal cup. Vedius ordered that he be seized and not die in an ordinary way: he was ordered to be thrown to the lampreys, enormous ones which Vedius kept in a fish-pond. Who wouldn't think that he did this because of luxury? It was from cruelty. The slave escaped from his hands and fled to Caesar's feet, to beg for nothing else than that he might die some other way, lest he become food.

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