

The Perversion of Nature in the Slavery of Seneca's 47th Letter

In Seneca's 47th letter to Lucilius, Seneca sees slavery as an inherent part both of human experience and of Roman society. Not only may one, at any time, fall into the power of another (an owner, a beloved, or a king) but we may also become a slave to passions. All the same everyone suffers the servitude of *Fortuna* (47.1). Nevertheless, Seneca sees two distinct visions of human slavery. The first slavery is *familiariter* (47.1), as we see in the slavery which Lucilius administers and in the familial slavery of ancestral Rome (47.14). Here, the relation between the master and slave is mediated by friendship. The second slavery, the decadent, urban slavery typical of Seneca's present day, is filled with enmity and fear.

It is this second slavery which inspires the graphic depictions which litter the 47th letter. The relationship characterized by fear and hatred (mutual on both accounts) creates a discord which not only alienates master and slave from each other, but each also is alienated from his or her own nature. This latter understanding of the passage will help to explain the depictions which persists throughout the letter as a whole, in which we see slaves, unsleeping and unfed, attending a master who has eaten to the point of his own physical suffering (47.2-3), the *obsonatores* who are finely attuned to the palate and digestion of their master (47.8), and the *vini minister* who must embody boy, man, and girl (47.7). In the case of slaves, simple need is ignored while it is outstripped by the lifestyle of the master.

These depictions, then, envision a slavery which upends the Stoic maxim to live in accordance with nature. The master's bodily functions which ought to be autonomous, such as taste, hunger, and digestion, are instead hoisted upon the slave. The slave, meanwhile, must check even those actions which are beyond control, being beaten for letting loose a chance (*fortuita*) cough or sneeze (47.3). Ultimately, the master's existence is divided up and lived through the many while the nature of the slave is obliterated and perverted.