

*Casu in meridianum spectaculum incidi: Seneca's Ep. 7 in Context*

This paper discusses Seneca's 7th *Epistle* and its famous description of Seneca's visit to a mid-day gladiator show. For the most part, scholars have focused on Seneca's apparent condemnation of bloody spectacles: does he espouse an humanitarian concern for those who fight in the arena or is he more narrowly interested in the effect that watching the show has on the spectators? Does he condemn all arena shows or only the sort described in the letter, in which condemned criminals are forced to fight one another equipped with no armor? The story of the visit to the arena show, however, is often discussed in isolation, plucked out of its letter, the sequence of letters to which that belongs, and Seneca's larger goals for the *Epistles*. In my paper I will show how the story functions in these contexts and cannot be separated from them without distorting its meaning.

I first consider the story's relation to the rest of the 7th letter and argue that we have to understand the story as an illustration designed to support the larger argument of the letter that Lucilius should avoid the bad influence of other people while he develops philosophical defenses. Seneca has intentionally chosen an extreme example of the bad influence of other people and told that example in a vivid and urgent way in order to add more power to his argument. Additionally, the imagery of the arena reinforces Seneca's argument. His description of people in the arena harming each other while they have no defenses and are allowed no escape mirrors his warning to Lucilius in the rest of the letter that others will continually press vices on him and not allow him a chance to develop philosophical defenses. Seneca thus employs a number of tactics in the story to convince Lucilius to withdraw.

The imagery and argument of *Ep. 7* also fits into a larger sequence of letters in Book 1 of the *Epistles*. Across these letters he explores the philosopher's proper attitude towards other

people, both society at large and other philosophers. With each new letter Seneca shifts his focus somewhat and approaches this theme from a new angle. He thus displays a model of a mind working through positions over time and creates a drama of reasoning. In particular, *Ep. 7* should be understood as an inversion of *Ep. 6*. In *Ep. 6*, Seneca had focused on the positive benefits that come from the community and friendship shared by philosophers and extolled the importance of *exempla* for philosophical progress. In *Ep. 7*, in contrast, Seneca offers an *exemplum* of the damaging effects of the unphilosophical.

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