

SUCH A STOIC

How Seneca became Ancient Rome's philosopher-fixer.

By Elizabeth Kolbert

S ometime in the spring of the year 59, the emperor Nero decided to murder his mother. As you can imagine, the two were not on good terms. In a gesture designed to appear conciliatory, Nero invited his mother, Agrippina, to join him at a festival in Baiae, a resort town near present-day Naples. During the festivities, he treated her with great affection. Then, when it was time for her to leave, he presented her with a gift—a beautifully appointed boat to ferry her up the coast.

The gift was supposed to be a death trap. But just about everything that should have gone wrong didn't. The deck of the ship fell in, yet, rather than killing Agrippina, it crushed one of her attendants. The hull, too, had been crafted to break apart; in all the confusion, though, it failed to do so. The rowers tried to overturn the ship. Once again, the effort fell short. Agrippina and a second attendant, Acerronia, swam free. Acerronia—"rather unwisely," as Tacitus puts it—kept screaming that she was Agrippina and needed help. The rowers rushed over and bashed her on the head with their oars. The real Agrippina slipped away. She was picked up by a fishing boat and deposited safely onshore. When Nero learned that his mother had survived, he sent his minions to stab her.

This series of unfortunate events put the emperor in a pickle. The whole point of the affectionate display and the gift of the boat had been to make Agrippina's death look like an accident. (Even in imperial Rome, matricide was, apparently, bad P.R.) Now this was impossible. And so Nero turned to the man he had always relied on, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, better known as Seneca the Younger, or just plain Seneca.

If poets and philosophers dream of influencing those in power, Seneca was uniquely positioned to do so. He was a celebrated rhetorician, a satirist, the author of several books of natural history, and a playwright. He was also what today might be called an ethicist. Among his many works of moral philosophy are "De Ira" ("On Anger"), "De

Providentia” (“On Providence”), and “De Brevitate Vitae” (“On the Shortness of Life”). Seneca had been Nero’s tutor since the younger man was twelve or thirteen, and he remained one of his closest advisers.

After the botched boating accident, Seneca set to work. Writing in the voice of the emperor, he composed a letter to the Senate explaining what had happened. Hungry for power, Agrippina had been planning a coup. Once the plot was revealed, she’d taken her own life. As for the shipwreck, that was a sign that the gods themselves had tried to intervene on the emperor’s behalf.

At least in public, the response of Rome’s élite to the letter was jubilation. Tacitus reports that there was “a marvelous rivalry” among the senators in celebrating Nero’s narrow escape; they held games, made offerings at shrines, and proposed that “Agrippina’s birthday should be classed among the inauspicious days.”

Most of the letter comes down to us in paraphrase, but one line has survived verbatim. It is considered an example of Latin rhetoric at its finest, though clearly it loses something in translation. “That I am safe, neither, as yet, do I believe, nor do I rejoice,” Seneca had the newly orphaned Nero declare.

All writers’ reputations have their ups and downs. In the case of Seneca, the highs have been very high and the lows pretty low. Early Christians so revered him that they faked an exchange of edifying letters between him and St. Paul. During the Reformation, both Calvin and Zwingli turned to his writings for inspiration. Montaigne wrote a “defense” of Seneca, Diderot an essay on his life.

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Then Seneca fell out of favor. Among the Romantics, he was regarded as a poor philosopher and a worse playwright. Even his brilliant epigrammatic style was ridiculed; the British historian Thomas Macaulay once observed—epigrammatically—that reading Seneca was “like dining on nothing but anchovy sauce.”

These days, Seneca is again on the upswing. In the past year, two new biographies have appeared: “Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero” (Knopf), by James Romm, a classicist at Bard College, and “The Greatest Empire: A Life of Seneca” (Oxford), by Emily Wilson, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. The two volumes are admiring of Seneca’s talents and, to varying degrees, sympathetic to his pedagogical predicament. Romm and Wilson, both teachers themselves, suggest that Nero was, from the start, a lost cause. But they also acknowledge that this leaves a tricky question unresolved. The letter “explaining” Agrippina’s murder is just one of the ways Seneca propped up Nero’s regime—a regime that the average Julius, let alone the author of “De Ira,” surely realized was thoroughly corrupt. How to explain the philosopher-tutor’s sticking by his monstrous pupil?

Seneca was born around 4 B.C. in the capital of the Roman province of Hispania Ulterior, now the city of Córdoba. He was, it appears, a sickly child and a pampered one. When he was still quite young, he, his father, and his two brothers

moved to Rome for the sake of the boys' education. Presumably, Seneca studied rhetoric, which was the one "R" of Roman education, but in all his extant writings he never mentions this. By contrast, he makes much of his training in philosophy, from a Greek named Attalus.

Attalus was a Stoic, and Seneca became one, too. In his many works of moral philosophy, Seneca consistently maintains that the key to a virtuous life is freedom from passion. Virtue, in turn, is necessary for happiness and also sufficient to produce it. Very little survives of the Greek Stoics, whom Seneca must have read, but the tradition placed great emphasis on austerity and self-mastery. Seneca praises poverty and argues that the wise man will allow neither joy nor grief to affect him, for both are mere distractions. Such a man, Seneca writes in an essay titled "Of Peace of Mind," will

go directly in the teeth of Fortune,
and never will give way to her. Nor
indeed has he any reason for
fearing her, for he counts not only
chattels, property, and high office,
but even his body, his eyes, his
hands, and everything whose use
makes life dearer to us, nay, even
his very self, to be things whose
possession is uncertain; he lives as
though he had borrowed them,
and is ready to return them
cheerfully whenever they are
claimed.

When Seneca was in his thirties, his writing against "chattels, property, and high office" began to attract admiring notice from those with lots of chattels, property, and high office. Among his rich and powerful friends was Julia Livilla, a sister of the emperor Caligula.

In 41 A.D., Caligula was assassinated and replaced by his uncle Claudius. The new emperor accused Julia Livilla of adultery with Seneca. Whether the two were actually lovers or whether they were just unlucky is not known. (Claudius was, all evidence suggests, less benign than Robert Graves makes him out to be.) Julia Livilla was exiled

to an island—probably Ventotene, off Naples—where she died within a few years. Seneca was sent to Corsica.

Most of Seneca's works can't be dated; two essays that must have been composed during his years of exile are the "Consolation to Helvia" and the "Consolation to Polybius." In the first, Seneca addresses his mother, who is heart-stricken over his banishment. Exile, he tells her, is no big deal—basically just a change of address. Wherever we go, he writes, "two most excellent things will accompany us, namely, a common Nature and our own especial virtue." In the second, he addresses one of Claudius' top aides, who has recently lost a brother. Polybius should stop grieving, Seneca says, because his brother, like everyone else, was destined to die: "The seven wonders of the world, and any even greater wonders which the ambition of later ages has constructed, will be seen some day leveled with the ground. So it is: nothing lasts forever."

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The two "consolations" are exemplary Stoic works. Both advise indifference toward what might seem, to the untrained mind, terrible misfortunes. But they also betray a certain lack of stoicism. Already in Seneca's day, Corsica was a spot renowned for its beauty and was home to a community of sophisticated Romans. (A contemporary analogue would be, say, banishment to Martha's Vineyard.) And yet, Seneca laments to his mother, "What other rock is so barren or so precipitous on every side? . . . Who is more uncultured than the island's inhabitants?" Even as he consoles Polybius, Seneca makes a point of buttering up Polybius' boss. As long as Claudius "is safe all your friends are alive, you have lost nothing," he writes to the grief-stricken brother. "Your

eyes ought not only to be dry, but glad. In him is your all, he stands in the place of all else to you: you are not grateful enough for your present happy state . . . if you permit yourself to weep at all.”

Romm and Wilson read Seneca’s posturing as a failed effort to get himself recalled to Rome. Seneca ended up spending the better part of a decade in exile, and he would have spent even longer were it not for one of those episodic mate swaps which make the imperial family tree such a thicket. In 48 A.D., Claudius had his third wife killed and took as his fourth bride Agrippina—Caligula and Julia Livilla’s sister, and Claudius’ niece. It was she who persuaded Claudius to bring Seneca home.

The scheming wife is a fixture of Roman history. As bad as the men are, the women are worse—ruthless, cunning, and often sex-crazed. Many of the stories that come down to us are difficult to credit; for example, before Claudius had his third wife, Messalina, whacked, she was reported to have held a twenty-four-hour sex competition with a hooker. (According to Pliny, she won.)

Agrippina, a classic of the type, was married off at thirteen to Domitius, a notorious creep in his own right. (Domitius, who was three decades older, became Nero’s father.) After Domitius’ death, Agrippina found a new husband, a very rich man, whom, it was rumored, she then poisoned for his estate. She was thirty-three when she wed Uncle Claudius. He already had a son, Britannicus, as well as two daughters. Though a few years younger than Nero, Britannicus seemed well positioned to succeed his father. Agrippina set about promoting Nero ahead of him. She pushed aside (or had executed) anyone loyal to Britannicus and spread the rumor that he was an epileptic.

Agrippina had Seneca recalled nominally so that he could educate the adolescent Nero. (At the back of her mind may have been the model of Aristotle and Alexander the Great.) But she also found other uses for his talents. In 53 A.D., Agrippina arranged for Nero to marry one of Claudius’ daughters. A year after that, the story goes, she had Claudius murdered, using a poisoned mushroom. (Tacitus reports that Claudius recovered from the initial poisoning after his bowels “were relieved.” The quick-thinking Agrippina then had him poisoned again, using a feather that was stuck down his throat, ostensibly as an emetic.) Within hours of Claudius’ death, Nero claimed power in a speech to the Praetorian Guard. The speech, which promised the loyal soldiers a huge bonus, was written for him by Seneca.

Claudius' murder set off a round of bloody housekeeping. Anyone whom the new regime perceived as a threat was polished off. Britannicus met his end within six months of his father. This time, the poison was delivered in a pitcher of water. When the boy dropped dead at the dinner table, Nero told the other guests that he was having a fit and they should just keep eating. According to Tacitus, most did.

Britannicus' murder prompted one of Seneca's most famous moral treatises, "On Mercy." The work is addressed to Nero, who is also its subject. Seneca's conceit is that the philosopher has nothing to teach the emperor about clemency; the essay is merely a "mirror" to show the young ruler his own virtues. He is beneficent and kindhearted, and can honestly say that he has "spilt not a drop of human blood in the whole world."

Romm and Wilson acknowledge that the juxtaposition of the adulation and the murder looks pretty bad. "On Mercy," Wilson observes, can be read as a sign that Seneca was "willing to praise this violent, dangerous, and terrifyingly powerful young ruler even to the extent of absolutely denying the reality of his behavior."

And what looks even worse is that Seneca grew rich from Nero's crimes. Following Britannicus' murder, the boy's wealth was divvied up, and Seneca, it seems, got a piece. By the end of the decade, the philosopher owned property not just in Rome but also in Egypt, Spain, and southern Italy. And he had so much cash on hand that he loaned forty million sesterces to Rome's newest subjects, the British. (The annual salary of a Roman soldier at that time was around nine hundred sesterces.) The recall of the loans purportedly prompted the British to revolt.

Seneca's fortune made possible a life style that was lavish by Roman or, for that matter, Hollywood standards. According to Dio, at one point the Stoic ordered "five hundred tables of citrus wood with legs of ivory, all identically alike, and he served banquets on them." In an essay entitled "On the Happy Life," composed around 59 A.D., Seneca addresses the strains between his philosophical commitments and his conspicuous consumption.

"Why do you drink wine that is older than you are?" he demands of himself. "Why does your wife wear in her ears the price of a rich man's house?" Seneca's answer, if it can be counted as such, is metaphorical: "The wise man would not despise himself, even if he were a midget; but he would rather be tall." Around the time that Seneca composed

“On the Happy Life,” a former consul named Publius Suillius had the temerity to accuse him in public of hypocrisy and of sucking the provinces dry. Shortly thereafter, Suillius found himself exiled.

One way to sort out the contradictions of Seneca’s life is not even to try. The art critic Robert Hughes labelled Seneca “a hypocrite almost without equal in the ancient world,” and left it at that. Romm and Wilson—and the new wave of Seneca scholars more generally—resist such reductive judgments. It is possible, in their view, to see Seneca as a hypocrite *and* as a force of moral restraint. In the most generous account, Seneca might even be regarded as a kind of Stoic martyr: to prevent worse from happening to Rome, he stayed on with Nero and, by doing so, sacrificed his good name.

Notwithstanding the murder of Britannicus, the first five years of Nero’s reign were an era of relative stability. This period—which the Roman emperor Trajan labelled the *quinquennium Neronis*—matches up almost exactly with the time of Seneca’s greatest influence over Nero. After the emperor sidelined his old tutor came, tellingly, what might be called the *novennium Neronis horribilis*—the nine terrible years. During this time, Rome drifted toward chaos as Nero devoted himself to building ever more opulent palaces and competing in the classical version of the Eurovision contest. (Though Nero did not “fiddle while Rome burned,” it’s entirely possible that he strummed the lyre and recited poetry as the city was consumed by flames in 64 A.D.)

Seneca’s tragedies support a sympathetic reading of his life or, alternatively, just complicate things still further. (We don’t know how many plays he wrote; eight of them survive. This is, in itself, remarkable, as only ten Roman tragedies come down to us.) Like the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, Seneca’s dramas are based on myths. But acts that the Greeks discreetly place offstage Seneca brings into full view—Jocasta’s suicide, Medea’s murder of her children, Atreus’ triumphant presentation of the heads of Thyestes’ sons. (In Seneca’s version of “Oedipus,” Jocasta stabs herself in the womb, which is also, according to Tacitus, where Agrippina asked to be stabbed by Nero’s assassins. Whether this is a case of life imitating art or art masquerading as history is impossible to say.) Seneca’s plays are so gory that for a long time it was assumed they couldn’t have been intended for the stage—the theory was that they were meant to be

read or recited like poetry—and even today many scholars consider them unperformable.

The plays are also distinguished—strangely, for a Stoic playwright—by the violence of their passions. The strongest characters in Seneca are, as a rule, the most out of control. “Even if I destroy two sons, still the number is too limited for my anguish,” Medea informs Jason before killing their second child. They operate in a world where redemption is unimaginable and punishment unlikely. As Medea flies off on her serpent-drawn chariot, Jason calls up after her, “Bear witness that wherever you go there are no gods.”

Romm and Wilson interpret the plays similarly. In the tragedies, they argue, myth becomes an instrument for voicing thoughts and feelings it would have been too dangerous for Seneca to express directly. His disgust at Nero’s excesses, his guilt over his own collaboration, his ambivalence about power and ambition—all are projected onto the House of Atreus. (Romm calls “Thyestes” such a “self-referential” work that he doubts it could have been published while Seneca was alive.)

This reading of the plays makes sense but, as Wilson acknowledges, runs the risk of “circularity”: Seneca’s dramas must reflect a hidden moral anguish, because nowhere else in his writings is this moral anguish expressed. Another way to approach the plays is as genre pieces trafficking in the outré—the Roman equivalent of “Reservoir Dogs” or “Django Unchained.” In this reading, what the tragedies reveal is how lightly Seneca took his writings. Plays, treatises, speeches—all were to him just clever phrases strung together, so many “words, words, words.”

Seneca’s own tragic end came in 65 A.D., when he was implicated in a plot to assassinate Nero and install in his place a good-looking nobleman named Gaius Piso. (By some accounts, there was within this conspiracy a sub-conspiracy to kill Piso, too, and make Seneca emperor.) The plotters bungled things, and Nero cut them down one after another. To the end, Seneca maintained his innocence, and he may even have been telling the truth. But, as no one knew better than he, truth was not the issue. He was ordered to commit suicide. He cut his wrists, and when that didn’t work he tried the veins behind his knees. Supposedly, as he died, he called in his secretary, so he could dictate one last speech. ♦



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