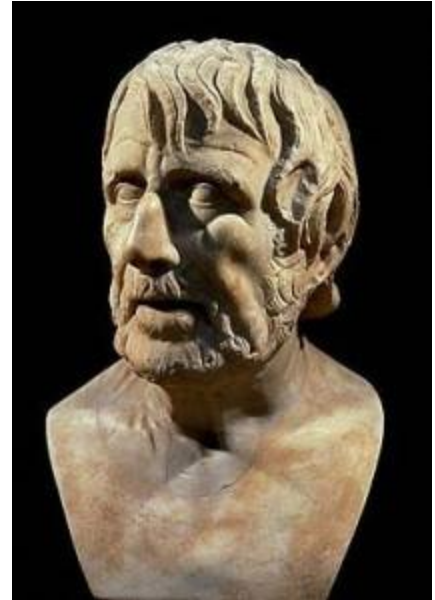


Lucius Annaeus Seneca

the Younger

Lucius Annaeus Seneca the Younger (ca. 4 B.C.-65 A.D.) was a Roman philosopher important in his own day as tutor and "prime minister" of the emperor Nero.

The philosophical works of Seneca although not especially original, show such nobility of sentiment that Christian writers on morality and ethical conduct have drawn on him over the centuries; he seems to have invented a highly rhetorical type of tragedy, the influence of which was especially widespread in the Renaissance; and his literary style, terse, epigrammatic, and full of intermittent brilliance, provided a respectable rhetorical alternative to the long, periodic sentences of Cicero and had some influence on the development of the normal literary prose style of English, French, and other languages.



Seneca was born in Cordova, Spain, about 5 or 4 B.C., the son of the famous writer on rhetoric known as Seneca Rhetor. Seneca's elder brother was proconsul of Achaëa in A.D. 51-52 and was the "Gallio" before whose tribunal Paul was brought. His younger brother was the father of the poet Lucan. His mother was Helvia, a cultivated woman deeply interested in philosophy, and one of her sisters was the wife of a man who was later prefect of Egypt. This sister brought Seneca to Rome as a small child.

Seneca's schooling had a great influence on his later life. He disliked his studies under teachers who insisted on verbal criticism and on detailed learning, but his rhetorical studies, under the leading men of his day, including his own father, left a deep impression on his style. He was, however, most deeply involved in the study of philosophy. His teachers, disciples of the eclectic but basically Stoic Roman philosopher Quintus Sextius, filled him with an enthusiasm for philosophy which he never lost and never wholly lived up to, and the rigorous asceticism into which he plunged so weakened his

already poor constitution that his health began to decline. He thought of suicide, but was stopped by his regard for his father, who also pointed out that he might be mistaken for a devotee of certain foreign superstitions which the emperor Tiberius was attempting to stamp out. Instead, Seneca was sent to visit his aunt in Egypt.

After his return from Egypt, Seneca secured election (ca. A.D. 31) to the quaestorship as a result of his aunt's influence and began his legal career. His oratory (all of it lost) rapidly gained him renown, which became dangerous after the accession in 37 of Emperor Caligula, who wanted no rivals in this field. Seneca would probably have been murdered if Caligula had not been informed that Seneca was very sick and could not live long. Seneca then betook himself to other literary fields, to alternating periods of retreat and meditation with his public work, and to building his private fortune.

Trial and Exile

After the accession of Claudius as emperor in 41, Seneca was for a while prominent in the court as a member of the party of Agrippina and Julia Livilla, Claudius's nieces. The empress Messalina, however, whose influence over Claudius was all-powerful, saw the two princesses as dangerous rivals and secured the banishment of Julia Livilla in 41 on charges of immorality. Seneca was accused of being her lover and condemned to death by the Senate, but his punishment was changed to banishment to Corsica by the Emperor.

Seneca spent the next 8 years in exile on Corsica. He was miserable. He was a literary man, without access to learned men; a man who loved human society, removed from his friends; a man of acquisitive instincts, deprived of his property; and a man who enjoyed power and influence, reduced to impotence and apparent friendlessness. Cringing flattery of the Emperor and of the Emperor's powerful freedman Polybius proved useless, but in 49 he was recalled at the behest of Agrippina, who had survived Messalina and married her uncle Claudius. Seneca was to be tutor to Nero, her son and the adopted son of Claudius, and he was appointed praetor for the year 50.

Life under Nero

Claudius was murdered by Agrippina in 54, and Nero acceded to the throne. The next 5 years, while Nero was under the influence of Seneca and Sextus Afranius Burrus, became famous for their good government and general happiness. The court was also aware of crimes and intrigues, most notably

the murder of Britannicus, Claudius's son, and thus Nero's most dangerous rival, in 55. In 55 or 56 Seneca was appointed to a suffect consulship.

In 59 Agrippina, who had been Seneca's patroness, was murdered by her son—quite possibly, as Nero explained to the Senate in a statement written by Seneca, as the result of the discovery of plots on her part against the throne. In 62 Burrus died, and one of his successors, Ofonius Tigellinus, soon came to exercise an evil influence over his master. Realizing that his major support was gone and that Tigellinus was working for his removal, Seneca, who must have been sick of being compromised by the necessities of state, asked to be allowed to retire and offered to put at Nero's disposal the vast fortune he had acquired in his service; Nero permitted his retirement but refused the proffered wealth.

Seneca devoted the next 3 years of his retirement to his studies and writings, but in 65 he was implicated (along with, among others, his nephew Lucan) in Piso's conspiracy, and his death became inevitable. He was ordered to commit suicide by Nero, according to Tacitus.



Much of the shabbiness of Seneca's life was made up for by the manner of his death, calm and philosophical, which showed true Stoic nobility. Tacitus related that Seneca's body had become so thin from fasting that he had difficulty in getting the blood to flow from his opened veins. His second wife, Pompeia Paulina, wanted to commit suicide with him but was prevented from doing so.

Philosophical Works

Seneca's philosophical works are marked by neither originality of thought nor depth of speculation, but rather by enthusiasm of presentation and an understanding of the practical limitations of life and the weaknesses of human nature. The chronological arrangement of these works is uncertain, but it is generally agreed that very few of them predate his exile.

Ten works, in 12 books, have been handed down to us under the name Dialogues, although only one of them could be considered an actual dialogue. Three of these are "consolationes", treatises, partly philosophical, partly rhetorical, attempting to cure grief. In addition, there are three books composing *On Anger*. *On the Happy Life* develops the standard Stoic view that happiness is to live in accordance with nature and to practice virtue, and it contains an interesting defense of the wise man's possession and good use of wealth. There are three works addressed to Annaeus Serenus, *On the Constancy of a Wise Man*, *On Tranquility of Mind*, and the fragmentary *On Leisure*.

Some other philosophical works of Seneca are seven books called *Natural Questions*, written in 62-63, a loosely arranged compilation of information on natural science, which formed the standard work on cosmology for the Middle Ages until the rediscovery of Aristotle. The 124 *Epistles to Lucilius* contain innumerable digressions which give a fascinating picture of Roman life.

His Tragedies

Ten plays are ascribed to Seneca. One of these, the *Octavia*, the only extant Roman historical drama, is almost universally rejected as being written by Seneca. The *Hercules Oetaeus* has also been generally rejected, but the consensus of scholarship favors Senecan authorship for the *Hercules Furens*, *Troades*, *Medea*, *Phaedra*, *Phoenissae*, *Oedipus*, *Agamemnon*, and the *Thyestes*, the only play whose Greek model has not been preserved. Nothing is known about the time of composition of these plays.

Seneca's major inspiration was Euripides, the source of half of his dramas. He took from Euripides an interest in psychological analysis, especially of abnormal types, in philosophical speculation, and in rhetorical effect and developed each of these to what often seems an excessive degree. The Stoic doctrine which proclaimed that a good man is totally good and a bad man totally evil makes his characters less humanly alive than the Greek characters. In these plays Seneca's rhetoric is almost

unrestrained: overelaboration of realistic detail until it becomes ludicrous, mythological pedantry, and unending verbal cleverness and epigrammatic morality are but part of an overall exaggeration and declamatory urgency which soon wearies the reader.

Seneca's tragedies were not written for actual performance but for dramatic reading. Some actions, such as the murder of Medea's children, could hardly have been presented on an ancient stage, and many speeches and choruses, while too long to be tolerable in the theater, would have been especially pleasing as readings to literary circles trained to appreciate ingenious rhetoric and description. Seneca wrote a very cruel and witty satire on the deification of Claudius, the *Apocolocyntosis* ("Pumpkinification"). The Emperor's habits, such as his fondness for acting as a judge and playing dice, speech mannerisms, and physical infirmities are mercilessly parodied. The work is, in form, a Menippean satire, composed of mingled prose and verse, and is amusing for its use of legal language and parodies of Claudius's and Augustus's prose styles.

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