

Seneca - General Background

Post by “Cassius” of July 22, 2024 at 4:11 PM

[Here's a middle-of-the road article on Seneca well worth reading](#), and it starts with this stark example of Seneca's willingness to deceive. Thanks to Kalosyni for this **very humorous article -- Highly Recommended!**:

Such a Stoic

By Elizabeth Kolbert

January 26, 2015

New Yorker

Quote

Sometime 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 elite 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.

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?

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Also, and this is a cute turn of phrase:

Quote

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.

So it was AGRIPPINA who had Seneca recalled for him to end up as Nero's tutor -- hard to imagine a more disreputable sponsor:

Quote

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.)

The dishonorable acts of Seneca keep coming:

Quote

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.

And get worse and worse:

Quote

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.