



The Greatest Empire: A Life of Seneca

Emily Wilson

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By any measure, Seneca (?4-65AD) is one of the most significant figures in both Roman literature and ancient philosophy. His writings are voluminous and diverse, ranging from satire to disturbing, violent tragedies, from metaphysical theory to moral and political discussions of virtue and anger. Seneca found himself at the turbulent center of Roman imperial power, making him thus an important witness to the Empire's first dynasty, the Julio-Claudians. Exiled by the emperor Claudius in the wake of a sex scandal, he was eventually brought back to Rome to become tutor and, later, speech-writer and advisor to Nero. Seneca was suspected of plotting against Nero, condemned to die, and ultimately took his own life—an act that is one of the most iconic suicides in Western history.

The life and works of Seneca pose a number of fascinating challenges. How can we reconcile the bloody tragedies with the prose works advocating a life of Stoic tranquility? How are we to balance Seneca the man of principle, who counseled a life of calm and simplicity, with Seneca the man of the moment, who amassed a vast personal fortune in the service of an emperor seen by many, at the time and afterwards, as an insane tyrant? In this definitive and moving biography, Emily Wilson presents Seneca as a man under enormous pressure, struggling for compromise in a world of absolutism. *The Greatest Empire* offers us the portrait of a life lived perilously in the gap between political realities and philosophical ideals, between what we aspire to be and what we are.

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