

# **LETTERS FROM A STOIC**

## **THE ANCIENT CLASSIC**

SENECA

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DONALD ROBERTSON

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# **LETTERS FROM A STOIC**

**The Ancient Classic**

**SENECA**

With an Introduction by

**DONALD ROBERTSON**



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*Moral letters to Lucilius (Epistulae morales ad Lucilium)* by Seneca

Translated by Richard Mott Gummere

A Loeb Classical Library edition; volume 1 published 1917; volume 2 published 1920; volume 3 published 1925

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 9781119751359 (hardback)

ISBN 9780857088796 (epdf)

ISBN 9781119751434 (epub)

Cover Design: Wiley

# AN INTRODUCTION

## BY DONALD ROBERTSON

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, also known as Seneca the Younger, is one of the most compelling and yet paradoxical figures in Roman history.

Ancient historians, particularly Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio, provide us with important details about his life. These mainly regard Seneca's relationship with Nero, with whose rule as emperor his own story is intertwined. Our information from these sources is very sparse and its reliability has often been questioned.

Seneca himself was a very prolific writer. Yet if we turn to his works for clues about his life and character, we encounter another notorious problem - he was carefully *constructing* his own public image.

## THE SENECA ENIGMA

Seneca's writings employ rhetorical methods to paint a picture of his life that is, in many ways, quite at odds with the historical evidence. For instance, those who read only the *Moral Letters*, written to his friend Lucilius, are bound to form a very different impression of Seneca than those who consult other Roman sources about his life. Indeed, what Seneca tells us about himself often says more about *how he wished to appear* than about how he actually was in reality. For example, he was by profession a rhetoric tutor. However, he says very little in his writings about his passion for rhetoric, his position as an imperial speechwriter, or his relationship with Nero's court. He

wants to present himself, first and foremost, as a Stoic philosopher.

A second example is the way Seneca describes his banishment to the island of Corsica. Corsica was a thriving colony for wealthy Romans, long known for exporting wine. Seneca almost certainly lived in relative luxury there, probably accompanied by his wife, and attended by a large retinue of slaves. Perhaps slaves even carried him around Corsica in a sedan chair, his typical mode of transportation in the later writings (e.g. *Moral Letters*, 55). Seneca chose, however, to portray himself as stranded on a 'barren rock' where he eked out a very austere and lonely existence, surrounded by uncivilized foreigners. In doing so, Emily Wilson notes, he appears to be drawing inspiration from the earlier writings of the poet Ovid, who was exiled to a remote town called Tomis, beside the Black Sea, at the edge of the Roman Empire on the so-called Scythian Frontier. Corsica, by contrast, is off the coast of Italy, just two days' sailing from the port of Ostia, near Rome. Today, it's a popular holiday destination.

The enduring success with which Seneca reconstructed his own persona is perhaps best illustrated by the curious way in which another man's face was, for many decades, mistaken for his. Seneca tells us that he suffered throughout life from some kind of chronic lung condition, possibly pulmonary tuberculosis. He says that he 'became totally emaciated' through illness and often felt like taking his own life. He was only stopped by the thought that his loving father, who was now advanced in years, would be distraught at losing his son. However, Seneca's writings often contain conflicting accounts. He also says that it was philosophy that saved him from committing suicide:

My studies were my salvation. I ascribe it to philosophy that I recovered and got stronger. It is to her that I owe my life, and that is the least of what I owe her. (*Moral Letters*, 78.3)

This and similar remarks about his inner struggle, and his embrace of simplicity and austerity, shape the perception many readers form of Seneca the man.

A bronze bust discovered at Herculaneum in 1794 was believed at first to depict Seneca, whose appearance was otherwise unknown at the time. The face was suitably haggard, slightly emaciated, with straggly hair and beard, and an intense, perhaps even angst-ridden, expression. This image was widely replicated and found its way into works of art and book illustrations. Today it frequently accompanies quotations from Seneca on the Internet. However, it is not Seneca.

This bust is now known as the Pseudo-Seneca and is believed to be modelled on an earlier Greek sculpture, perhaps of the poet Hesiod. In 1813, a double-herm - a single sculpture composed of two busts - was discovered, dating from the third century CE, which depicts Socrates and Seneca back to back. Seneca's name is conveniently engraved upon his chest. Real Seneca looks *completely* different from Pseudo-Seneca. He is an overweight, bald-headed man, with a double chin, heavy jowls, pursed lips, and an emotionless, perhaps slightly aloof expression.

Of course, we can't tell much about Seneca's character from his facial appearance. What we do know is that Seneca's modern readers have tended to come away from his writings with an image of him more like Pseudo-Seneca than real Seneca. In real life, perhaps unsurprisingly, Seneca looked less like our stereotypes of an anguished poet-philosopher and more like a typical billionaire Roman senator. 'It seems the face of a businessman or bourgeois',



as James Romm put it, 'a man of means who ate at a well-laden table'. Seneca's writings had once again created an image that proved to be dramatically at odds with the truth.

With these notes of caution in mind, we may proceed to examine the main events of Seneca's highly eventful life.

## **SENECA'S FAMILY**

Seneca was born around 4 BCE, in Corduba, in the Roman province of Hispania - modern-day Córdoba in Spain. However, he tells us that we should view the details of his birth as trivial.

As for the fact of my birth: consider what it really is, in itself. Being born is a trivial thing, uncertain, with equal chance of turning into something good or bad. It's certainly the first step to everything else, but it's not better than everything else just because it came first. (*On Benefits*, 3.30)

Seneca came from a moderately wealthy family of Roman-Spanish knights of the eques, i.e. equestrian class. His writings create the impression of a lifelong desire to rise above, what seemed to him, relatively humble and provincial origins. It was not by accident that Seneca sought to attract the attention of the emperors Caligula and Claudius, and was finally appointed tutor to Nero, ultimately establishing himself at the centre of the imperial court as the emperor's right-hand man. He was a determined social climber who fought hard to be accepted into the highest echelons of Roman society.

Although Corduba had been his family's ancestral home, and his birthplace, Seneca's father brought him to Rome as a small child, where he was raised and educated. His father bore the same name and is therefore known as Seneca the

*Elder*, or sometimes Seneca the Rhetorician. He was a historian who became famous for his work on the art of declamation. Seneca's mother, Helvia, was an educated woman, to whom he addressed an open letter of consolation, which, as we'll see, survives today.

Seneca was the middle of three brothers. His elder brother, Novatus, was adopted by the rhetorician Junius Gallio, from whom he took the name Gallio himself. Gallio was appointed consul and later made governor of the Roman province of Achaëa, in modern-day Greece, in 52 CE, under Emperor Claudius. He is mentioned in the New Testament, where the apostle Paul is arraigned before him (*Acts* 18.12-17). Seneca's younger brother, Mela, was the father of the poet Lucan, who authored the epic *Pharsalia*, which lauds the great Roman Republican hero of the civil war, Cato of Utica. Lucan was a Stoic, like his uncle Seneca, and they seem to have been quite close.

Seneca had a wife at the time of his death, Pompeia Paulina, but we know very little about her or their marriage. Some historians believe that this was his second marriage and he'd earlier been wedded to a woman whose name is unknown. He mentions having one son who died in infancy, about whom virtually nothing is known. Later in life, Lucan, his highly talented but ill-fated nephew, was perhaps the closest Seneca had to a son.

## **EDUCATION AND INFLUENCES**

Seneca's life at Rome was defined by several dramatic reversals of fortune, owing to his falling in or out of favour with successive Roman emperors. Indeed, it's no exaggeration to say that the drama of his real life often rivals that found in the celebrated tragedies written by him. He was born during the reign of Augustus, the founder of the Roman Empire, who died when Seneca was around

eighteen years old. Indeed, over the course of his life, Seneca would witness the successive rule of all five emperors from the Julio-Claudian dynastic line: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero.

Seneca the Elder had his son educated in philosophy and rhetoric. The father greatly admired a Greek Stoic called Attalus, who became his son's first and main teacher in philosophy. Seneca the Younger speaks fondly of him several times:

This was the advice, I remember, which Attalus gave me in the days when I practically laid siege to his classroom, the first to arrive and the last to leave. Even as he paced up and down, I would challenge him to various discussions; for he not only kept himself accessible to his pupils, but met them half-way. His words were: 'The same purpose should possess both master and scholar - an ambition in the one case to promote, and in the other to progress.' (*Moral Letters*, 108)

Little is known about Attalus, and although he authored several works, none of them survive. Curiously, Seneca has nothing to say about the most famous Roman Stoics of his lifetime. Thrasea and his circle are ignored. The most influential Stoic of this era, Musonius Rufus, has been called the 'Roman Socrates' by modern scholars. He was mentor to the leaders of the Stoic Opposition against Nero's rule, and later became the teacher of Epictetus. Musonius was about forty years old when Seneca died, but he's not mentioned even once in Seneca's writings.

In 20 CE, when he was aged around twenty-five, Seneca became quite ill from a lung condition. He travelled to Alexandria in the Roman province of Egypt, where his uncle Gaius Galerius served as prefect. While there he learned that his tutor, Attalus, had been exiled by Emperor

Tiberius. Either in Rome, or perhaps later in Alexandria, Seneca became a student of the School of the Sextii. Dating from around 50 BCE, it was one of the first major schools of philosophy to have originated in Rome, although they apparently wrote in Greek. Little is known of their teachings except that they were a unique hybrid of philosophical ideas, including elements of Stoicism and Pythagoreanism. Seneca held the school's founder, Quintus Sextius, in exceptionally high regard:

We then had read to us a book by Quintus Sextius the Elder. He is a great man, if you have any confidence in my opinion, and a real Stoic, though he himself denies it. (*Moral Letters*, 49)

Although they were an eclectic school of philosophy, Seneca preferred to call the Sextians Stoics, thereby bolstering his own credentials as a Stoic teacher. As far as we know, Seneca had never travelled to Greece – an omission that would potentially have weakened his status as an expert on Stoic philosophy in the eyes of fellow Romans.

In addition to reading the works of Sextius, Seneca became the student of an otherwise unknown Sextian philosopher called Sotion.

It was but a moment ago that I sat, as a lad, in the school of the philosopher Sotion: but a moment ago that I began to plead in the courts, but a moment ago that I lost the desire to plead, but a moment ago that I lost the ability. (*Moral Letters*, 49)

Seneca describes Sotion's views on reincarnation and vegetarianism, which are clearly influenced by those of Pythagoras – although the Sextians claimed to arrive at the same conclusions based on different arguments.

## CAREER AT ROME

After spending about a decade convalescing in Egypt, Seneca finally returned to Rome in the year 31, during the rule of Tiberius. He soon rose to the office of quaestor, the first rung on the Roman *cursus honorum*, or course of offices, which earned him the right to sit in the senate. The elderly Emperor Tiberius finally passed away in 37 CE. According to some accounts, he was poisoned or smothered by Caligula, his grand-nephew and adopted grandson, who succeeded him as emperor.

Seneca appears at first to have pursued a promising legal career. However, according to the historian, Cassius Dio, he was almost executed by Caligula, merely because he 'pleaded a case well in the senate while the emperor was present'. Presumably, Caligula didn't like the direction in which Seneca was influencing the senate and therefore saw his eloquence as a threat:

Gaius [Caligula] ordered him to be put to death, but afterwards let him off because he believed the statement of one of his female associates, to the effect that Seneca had a consumption in an advanced stage and would die before a great while. (*Cassius Dio*, 59.19)

It was perhaps following this incident that Seneca 'lost the desire to plead' and, as he puts it, later also the ability. Around this time, shortly after his return to Rome, he became known more as a writer and rhetorician. *The Consolation to Marcia*, believed to be the earliest of his known works, is thought to date from around 40 CE, when he was approaching middle age. It is, like his other consolations, an open letter, although it reads more like a modern essay. Marcia was a wealthy and influential Roman noble, the daughter of Aulus Cremutius Cordus, a famous historian. She had been mourning the loss of her son for

three long years. Seneca employs typical Stoic arguments, not so much to console her empathically as to persuade her to accept her loss, finish her period of mourning, and move on. We can probably infer from Seneca's continued output as a writer, and reports of his growing celebrity, that his early letters sparked public interest and were well received.

Meanwhile in the political realm, Caligula's rule was becoming increasingly tyrannical. In 39 CE, the emperor exiled his own sisters, Julia Livilla and Agrippina the Younger, for involvement in a failed plot to overthrow him. As we'll see, both of these powerful women were friends of Seneca and their stories are closely interlinked. In 41 CE, Caligula was assassinated by a faction of his own praetorian guard. Reputedly, a group of praetorians sympathetic to imperial rule found his uncle, Claudius, cowering in fear behind a curtain, where he was hiding from the assassins. They whisked him away to the safety of their camp where he was acclaimed emperor in place of his nephew. Seneca's troubles, however, were about to worsen.

## **EXILE**

After being acclaimed emperor, Claudius permitted Julia and Agrippina to return from exile to Rome. But before a year had passed, Julia was in trouble again. Claudius' wife, the Empress Messalina, accused Julia and Seneca of committing adultery with one another. They were both found guilty. Julia was exiled first, probably to a nearby island off the Italian coast, where Claudius shortly after ordered her death. Seneca, on the other hand, wasn't banished from Rome until the following year, which suggests there may have been more wrangling over his sentence. Messalina wanted the death penalty but Claudius, after some delay, sentenced Seneca to be exiled

to Corsica instead. Technically he was 'relegated', the mildest form of exile, which meant he avoided losing any property or being stripped of his citizenship. You could, therefore, call this an act of clemency on the emperor's part as Seneca got off much more lightly than Julia.

Around 42 CE, shortly after he arrived in Corsica, Seneca wrote another open letter of consolation. This one was to his own mother, Helvia, whom he sought to console not over a bereavement, as would be the norm for the genre, but over the grief caused to her by his own exile. In it, as noted earlier, Seneca portrays himself Stoically enduring a harsh and barren environment:

What can be found barer or more precipitous on every side than this rock? What more barren in respect of food? What more uncouth in its inhabitants? More mountainous in its configuration? Or more rigorous in its climate? (*Helvia*, 6)

In 44 CE, Seneca published another open letter of consolation. His fame as a writer seemed to be growing thanks to the popularity of these letters. This one was addressed to a freedman called Polybius who served as secretary to Claudius, and had considerable influence at court. Seneca urges Polybius, who had recently lost his brother, to console himself by focusing on the happiness that serving Claudius bestowed upon him. He says things like 'raise yourself up, and fix your eyes upon Caesar whenever tears rise to them; they will become dry on beholding that greatest and most brilliant light'. He tells Polybius to write a panegyric praising Claudius' reign, which might be read 'by all future ages', adding 'for he himself will afford you both the noblest subject and the noblest example for putting together and composing a history'.

The letter eventually turns from being a consolation of Polybius into a plea for mercy directed to his master, the emperor. While taking the opportunity to beg, via Polybius, for an imperial pardon, Seneca also heaps praise on Claudius for his clemency and other virtues. As we'll see, this could not be further removed from the way Seneca later chose to portray Claudius in writing. Seneca concludes by bemoaning the fact that his 'mind is dimmed and stupefied' by the tedium of his long exile. He writes of the difficulty in consoling another while he is steeped in his own sorrows. He complains that his Latin has suffered because around him, on Corsica, he 'hears nothing but a rude foreign jargon, which even barbarians of the more civilised sort regard with disgust'. Once again, his real circumstances appear to have been far more comfortable than he implies.

## **RETURN**

In 48 CE, the Emperor Claudius had his wife, Messalina, executed. Ironically, she was accused of a crime of infidelity not unlike the one for which she had demanded Seneca's execution. Shortly thereafter, Claudius married Agrippina the Younger, the sister of Caligula mentioned earlier. Agrippina soon had her new husband, the emperor, recall Seneca from exile. After eight years honing his art and building his reputation as a writer, Seneca finally got his wish to return to the centre of power. But his recall would have costs.

Agrippina hired Seneca, presumably based on his growing reputation as a writer, to become the rhetoric tutor of her twelve-year-old son, Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, the future Emperor Nero. Claudius, after marrying Agrippina, had adopted the boy, her son from a previous marriage. As Lucius/Nero was three years older than the emperor's



natural son, Britannicus, Nero effectively supplanted him and became second in line to the throne. Rival camps emerged supporting each of the boys, and Seneca's destiny was now bound to the faction supporting Nero.

Agrippina was a formidable woman who wielded considerable political influence behind the scenes. She promoted her son's status at court by, for example, dismissing the tutors of his rival Britannicus and replacing them with relative unknowns. Seneca, by contrast, was chosen to become Nero's tutor in part because his fame improved her son's public image. He was immediately advanced to the office of praetor, one of the most senior administrative positions in the Roman government. Roman adolescents would normally study literature and the basics of oratory under a grammarian. They would proceed to the more advanced study of formal rhetoric at around fifteen, with philosophy coming years later. So it's unlikely that Nero's lessons at this time focused directly upon Stoic philosophy, although Seneca presumably tried to incorporate some moral instruction.

## **THE REIGN OF NERO**

In 54 CE, Emperor Claudius died after eating some mushrooms. Agrippina, who employed an expert poisoner called Locusta, was widely believed to have had her husband's meal laced with deadly belladonna. Her son Nero was therefore proclaimed emperor, aged only sixteen. Seneca went from being Nero's rhetoric tutor to his political advisor and speechwriter. (We might compare his role to that of today's presidential chief of staff and spin doctor.) Tacitus said the speech Seneca wrote for Nero to deliver following Claudius' death was 'just as elegantly-written as one would expect from that celebrity', confirming that Seneca's fame as a rhetorician had grown.

Seneca became Nero's right-hand man and closest advisor, sharing influence with a military man, the praetorian prefect, Burrus.

As we've seen, while in exile Seneca had praised Claudius and urged Polybius to write a panegyric to him. Now Claudius had been killed off, though, and the political tides had changed direction. Seneca responded by publishing a biting satire ridiculing and degrading him, called *The Pumpkinification of the (Divine) Claudius*, in which he hailed Nero as the glory of Rome:

[Just as the sun god] brightly gleams on the world and renews his chariot's journey, so cometh Caesar; so in his glory shall Rome behold Nero. Thus do his radiant features gleam with a gentle effulgence, graced by the flowing locks that fall encircling his shoulders.  
(*Pumpkinification*, 4)

Now that Nero was emperor, Seneca was increasingly expected to praise him in public and extol his virtues. Nero rewarded his advisor with 'gifts' of money and property that quickly transformed Seneca into one of the richest men in Rome. Seneca's friends and family also benefited. His elder brother, Gallio, was made consul, the highest political office in the empire; Mela, his younger brother, was made a procurator; Lucan, his nephew, was made a quaestor; Pompeius Paulinus, Seneca's brother-in-law, was made an imperial legate; and Annaeus Serenus, one of his closest friends, was appointed commander of the night watch.

At first, Seneca's position perhaps seemed like an acceptable arrangement. Historians often view the first five years of Nero's reign, the *Quinquennium Neronis*, as promising, owing to the benevolent guiding influence of Seneca and Burrus. However, by accepting all these gifts and favours, Seneca was placing himself, and his friends, in

a vulnerable position. Nero, in other words, had an increasing amount of leverage over Seneca. What could possibly go wrong?

## **MURDER OF BRITANNICUS**

A year into Nero's reign, the question of his claim to the throne came to a head. His step-brother, Britannicus, was about to turn fifteen, making him an adult under Roman law. Whereas Nero had merely been adopted by Claudius, Britannicus was his flesh and blood, and therefore had a strong claim to the throne. However, Locusta the poisoner was now in Nero's service. 'All of a sudden, unsurprisingly, Britannicus dropped dead', as Emily Wilson puts it. Thus began Nero's spiralling descent into paranoia and tyranny.

The murder of Britannicus caused public outrage, in part because he was still only a child. Seneca responded by composing and publishing another open letter, this time addressed to the emperor, and titled *On Clemency*. In it he encourages Nero to show forgiveness and mercy towards his opponents. Seneca also used it as an opportunity to praise his former student as a paragon of virtue and a philosopher-king in the making. More importantly, perhaps, he also used it to publicly assert Nero's innocence of any killing:

You, Caesar, have granted us the boon of keeping our state free from bloodshed, and that of which you boast, that you have not caused one single drop of blood to flow in any part of the world, is all the more magnanimous and marvellous because no one ever had the power of the sword placed in his hands at an earlier age. (*On Clemency*, 11)

Although Seneca does not mention the death of Britannicus, the timing makes it obvious that he was

seeking to acquit Nero in the court of public opinion. The slyness with which Seneca here claims that Nero, who retained a poisoner, had never spilled a drop of blood, is very typical of his writings – it's technically true but obviously intended to mislead.

Many readers of the letter found it hard to believe that Seneca could have had the gall to shamelessly praise and exonerate Nero in the aftermath of his younger brother's murder. However, as Wilson suggests, 'the evidence that Seneca did indeed compose this work right after the death of Britannicus is incontrovertible. Some hope to excuse Seneca's comments by claiming that they can perhaps be read in a more nuanced way. Perhaps Seneca's letter should be seen as part of the genre known as mirrors of princes', seeking to convey not Nero's true reflection but the potential within him for virtue. However, Seneca's letter would have been widely circulated, and we must assume that many Romans would have taken them at face value. Seneca does not only say that Nero has the *potential* for wisdom and virtue, 'a great mind and great gentleness', but that he already possesses these gifts. Moreover, Seneca's claim that not even 'one single drop of blood' had ever been spilled at Nero's behest, probably came across to some as a twisted joke. Yet it may be that, in private, Seneca was troubled by the death of Britannicus. After all, the brutal murder of children is a theme that recurs in his plays, most notably *Thyestes*.

## **SUPER-RICH SENECA**

In 56 CE, shortly after these events, Seneca was appointed consul, the most senior political office in the Roman senate. Men who had attained consular rank were esteemed as nobles alongside the hereditary patrician class. Moreover, as soon as Britannicus had been killed off, Nero 'loaded his

best friends with gifts', according to Tacitus, presumably dividing up his dead brother's property among his closest advisors. This has been taken by some historians to explain, at least in part, how Seneca rose from moderately well-off provincial origins to become, under Nero, one of the richest men in the empire. Cassius Dio makes the extraordinary claim that Seneca was worth over 300 million sesterces, which would make him the Roman equivalent of a Warren Buffet or Jeff Bezos. Typically, only the Roman emperor himself or his closest associates might command such wealth. Hence another ancient source, the poet Martial, dubbed him 'Super-rich Seneca'.

Unsurprisingly, Seneca also seems to have owned many properties and a great deal of land throughout Italy, and possibly also in Egypt. We don't know how many slaves he owned, but given his considerable wealth and property, at a rough estimate, they may have numbered over a thousand. As an example of his extravagance, we're told that Seneca owned 500 identical citrus-wood tables with legs of ivory, used for hosting massive banquets. That may sound implausible to modern readers, but it was not unusual for Rome's elite to pride themselves on holding vast banquets, akin to festivals, where hundreds of guests would be entertained. One such banquet, hosted by Lucius Verus, the brother of Marcus Aurelius, reputedly cost 6 million sesterces to put on. Expensive furniture and tableware were highly prized status symbols in elite Roman society.

In 58 CE, a Roman senator called Publius Suillius, who was indicted by Seneca and others for judicial corruption, brought the counter-charge of financial corruption against Seneca. He accused Seneca, perhaps owing to lingering resentment over his exile, of having a vendetta against anyone who had aligned themselves with the Emperor Claudius. However, he also accused Seneca of having enriched himself at the public expense in the short space of

four years, i.e. since Nero became emperor. 'In Rome, he spread his nets to catch the wills of childless men', alleged Suillius, while 'Italy and the provinces were sucked dry by his insatiable usury'.

This latter allegation is supported by Cassius Dio's claim that Seneca, wishing suddenly to call in a 40 million sesterce loan made to native Britons under Roman rule, 'resorted to severe means' in demanding repayment. Some historians believe this was one of several events that provoked the famous 61 CE uprising against Roman rule in Britain, led by Queen Boudica.

Suillius was found guilty of corruption and sent into exile, forfeiting half his estate. According to Tacitus, Seneca then attempted to go after the man's son in court as well, but 'the emperor interposed his veto, on the ground that vengeance was satisfied'. In this instance, ironically, his wayward student Nero actually showed more clemency than Seneca. However, worryingly for Seneca, it demonstrated that Nero was now willing to publicly question the wisdom of his teacher's actions.

## **MURDER OF AGRIPPINA**

By 59 CE, Seneca's influence over Nero was waning. The emperor sidelined his powerful mother and plotted to have her murdered. He employed the bizarrely elaborate method of having Agrippina set sail in a boat rigged to collapse, with the intention of crushing and/or drowning her. However, she narrowly escaped and swam back to shore. Seneca and Burrus may have known of this entire scheme. In any case, Nero was forced to seek their help when it failed. Tacitus reports that 'Seneca took the initiative. He looked at Burrus and asked if the military should be ordered to carry out the killing' (*Annals*, 14.7). Burrus