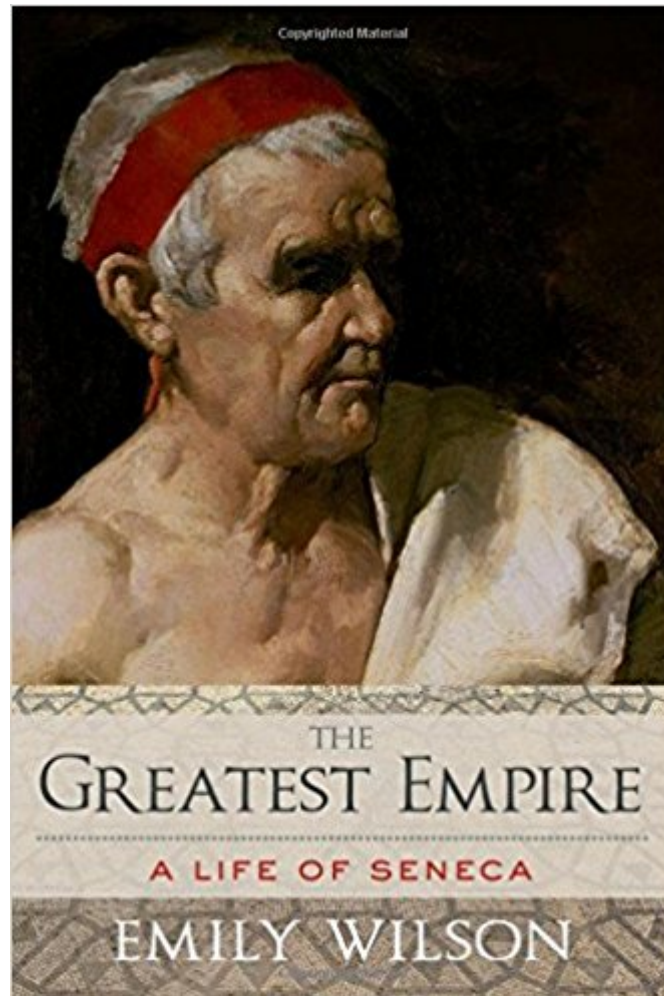




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# The Greatest Empire: A Life Of Seneca



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Wilson offers a carefully balanced narrative of Seneca's life that is derived, as it must be, from

partial and often contradictory sources" --Christian Century "This is a riveting and complete picture of Seneca's complex and compromised life. It is impeccably researched, carefully structured, and written with admirable brio. For good or ill, ours is a Senecan age." --Simon Critchley, *The New School for Social Research*"A fresh, perceptive, and in-depth look at the enigmatic Seneca, giving us a nuanced perspective into the conflicted mind and motives of the philosopher who embraced lofty Stoic ideals while serving Nero and amassing great wealth in the process. I honestly could not put it down, it is so insightful and well written and yes-suspenseful, even though we know the ending." --Margaret George, author of *Elizabeth I: The Novel* and *Helen of Troy: A Novel*"Unique as a scholarly book-length treatment of Seneca, this biography should appeal to anyone intrigued by the paradox of struggling to achieve wealth and power-and peace of mind." - *Library Journal*"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." --*The New Yorker* "Seneca lived in a world where dissimulation was a way of life, and the confusion between reality and failure woven into the very fabric of the state. It is the mirror he holds up to it which makes him such a great and unsettling writer, and which Wilson's fine biography does so much to explicate." --*The Telegraph*"Since Miriam Griffin's *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (1976), historians have wondered how Seneca could reconcile being a millionaire courtier and Nero's's adviser with his Stoic principles. For Wilson, the more interesting question is why he preached what he did, when he knew his integrity was so compromised. " --*The Guardian*"Wilson finds Seneca's life and work relevant to modern-day western culture, troubled by the psychological pressures that go with material wealth and by the problems attendant on consumerism and globalisation. By quoting in translation and explaining Roman practices she helps the general reader enjoy her well-written and imaginative book." --*History Today*"Morally our author is tough on Seneca, contrasting, for example, his lickspittle approach to Nero with Boudicca's resistance. But she is a persuasive extoller of his writing and the final chapter about his diverse legacy is breathtaking." --*The Spectator*"...the most famous and poignant example of a philosopher trying and spectacularly failing to improve a ruler, is that of the Roman Stoic Seneca, whose life is wonderfully retold here by the classicist Emily Wilson." --*The Sunday Times*

Emily Wilson is Associate Professor of Classical Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

Wilson writes clearly and concisely while seeking to explain. Unlike other biographies, this one does not drag. Most importantly, it makes the case for the relevance of Seneca studies for our times. This book is a very useful introduction to those planning to study Seneca in greater depth.

This is a very well-written biography. Those with some scholarly familiarity with Seneca and his era will see that the book is based upon a lot of research, erudition, and knowledge, and that it draws judiciously upon other scholarship while making really smart and interesting connections of its own. But it wears its erudition lightly, and non-specialist readers will also find it an interesting and illuminating read too. I'm impressed.

This purchase arrived in a timely manner."Nothing ends, but it becomes something else."

Very well-written and, for me, a very informative history; I'm very glad I bought and read it.

This is a really fascinating, well-done biography. Wilson treats the historical sources fairly, but focuses heavily on Seneca's own writings and the insight they offer into his psychology. In many parts, it reads more like literary analysis than history, but I don't think this is a bad thing: she does a great job highlighting the complexity and contradictions in his famously compartmentalized character. Four stars only because I found it to be a frustrating read in parts. Wilson would have benefitted from a tighter editing job: the writing is verbose, and there are places where she seems to circle back to the same point she'd just made a page before without developing it any further. There's a lot of musing and meandering: sometimes she seems to be implying an argument, but backs away from actually making it. As a result, the end feels slightly anti-climactic: she passed many fascinating points along the way, but it doesn't all come together. That said, I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in Seneca, or Roman history in general.

I always thought of Seneca as an incredibly wise man with absolute integrity. That notion has been absolutely shattered by this book. Seneca was wise in many ways as expressed in his Stoic teachings. He was, however, a complex character with plenty of ambition. I did not know that he was either directly or indirectly complicit in Nero's murder of his brother and mother. Seneca seems to justify and rationalize not only this but other behaviors and ways of thinking that are inconsistent with Stoic living, like his massive wealth, for example. It seems that at every turn he could minimize or in some other way account for these inconsistencies through the very application of Stoic

teachings which they seemed to violate. In some ways he was the great baseball coach who could not play but could teach the game. No question that his teachings which are true to the Stoic philosophy will have enduring value but his life is not necessarily something to admire as a model of that philosophy. He also contributed through his writings to the practice of rhetoric and to drama, and has continued to impact Stoic thinking today and other disciplines including psychology and political philosophy. I was not aware of how vile and despicable Nero was and how he, and apparently other Caesars, would kill on what was almost a whim, and do it early and often. A great book to learn about Nero, Stoicism, and Roman times but most all about a complex and fascinating figure.

Emily Wilson gives a strong and smartly terse look at the life of Seneca, one of the most respected voices to come out of the Julio-Claudian era of the Roman empire. Wilson's work here does a good job of introducing Seneca and his times. Though biographies can often settle too much on a general sense of what that period was like, Wilson quickly cuts to Seneca pure and simple. While never excluding the broader view of the society and politics Seneca played such a vital role within both as cultural contributor and his political influence, Seneca takes the chief role of this study as he should. Wilson avoids glib broad coverage of the times and places the man and his works front and center. This can be a bit of a dry work. It is not a light look at a period or a man. It is a well written scholarly look at someone whose influence still reaches us today.

This book is terrific, awesome, a masterpiece. Masterly written. It is a great addition to the standard books about Seneca's life, like the book *Dying Every Day*, because it goes way beyond just describing Seneca and his political adventures, but provides a lot of the details about philosophy, ancient history, and Seneca's family that is necessary to really understand the man (to the extent that he can be understood!). The book to me is written for people who want more than a political thriller, but one who really wants to understand the man and his times. But even more valuable than the information is the writing, which is spectacular. Every paragraph you think to yourself, "The author is either a naturally gifted author, or someone who is willing to spend hours to craft the perfect paragraph." The book is really worth reading just for the writing, even if one has little interest in Seneca. And I assure you, I have never even met Emily Wilson. Each word I say is sincere.

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