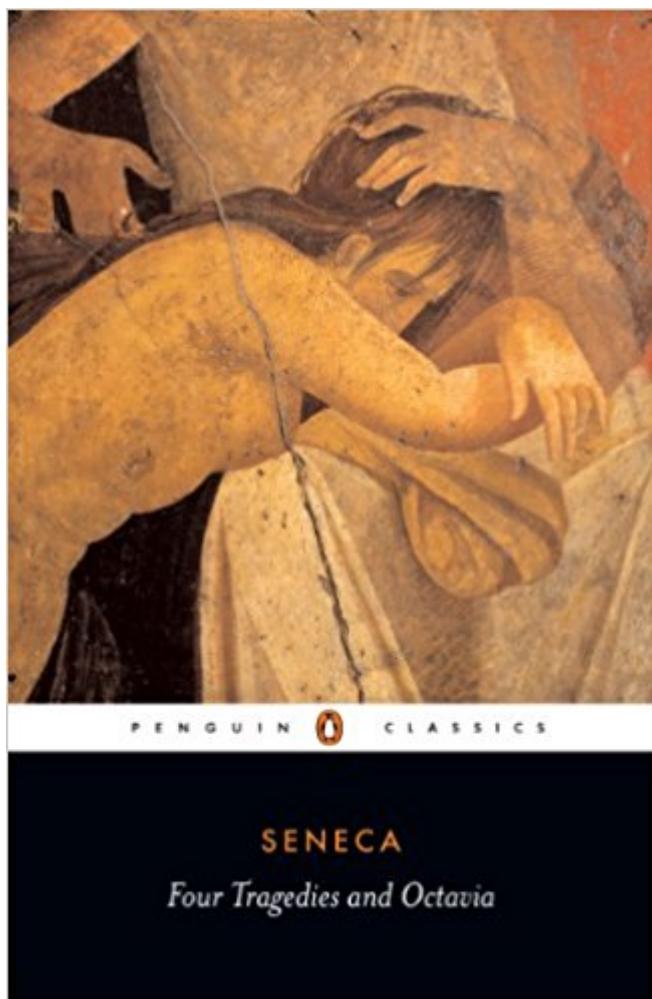


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Four Tragedies And Octavia (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Based on the legends used in Greek drama, Seneca's plays are notable for the exuberant ruthlessness with which disastrous events are foretold and then pursued to their tragic and often bloodthirsty ends. *Thyestes* depicts the menace of an ancestral curse hanging over two feuding brothers, while *Phaedra* portrays a woman tormented by fatal passion for her stepson. In *The Trojan Women*, the widowed Hecuba and Andromache await their fates at the hands of the conquering Greeks, and *Oedipus* follows the downfall of the royal House of Thebes. *Octavia* is a grim commentary on Nero's tyrannical rule and the execution of his wife, with Seneca himself appearing as an ineffective counsellor attempting to curb the atrocities of the emperor. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation)

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c.4BC-AD65) was born in Cordoba, Spain, where he was brought up

studying the traditional virtues of republican Roman life. He became a teacher of rhetoric but attracted attention for his incisive style of writing. Closely linked to Nero, his death was ordered by the emperor in AD65. Seneca committed suicide. E.F. Watling had translated many ancient classics for Penguin, including plays of Sophocles and Plautus. He died in 1990.

Seneca's tragedies are now regarded, if at all, as inferior imitations of ancient Greek tragedies, but during the Renaissance they loomed large indeed, helping to inspire the blossoming of Elizabethan drama that culminated in the works of Shakespeare. The scholarly consensus is that Seneca's tragedies were never meant to be performed, but I'm not sure: I suspect they were written for Nero's private theater, since Nero considered himself an actor and the often lurid subject matter would have tickled his fancy. I am equally convinced that Seneca did not write "Octavia," which deals with the murder of Nero's first wife. Such a topic would have been far too sensitive while Nero was alive, and the play was probably written during the reign of Vespasian. It holds particular interest as the only tragedy of the ancient world, other than Aeschylus' "Persians," to be based on a contemporary subject rather than a story from Greek mythology. Even at a distance of 1900 years and in translation, these works can have a shattering emotional impact. What set Seneca apart from the Athenians was his dependence on rhetoric, his fascination with black magic and witchcraft, and the loving detail he gives to descriptions of the most horrendous atrocities. "Thyestes," with its cannibal banquet (a clear inspiration for Shakespeare's "Titus Andronicus"), is pretty nasty but the other plays are less macabre, though still exhibiting a fondness for playing on the reader's nerves. Seneca's tragedies have long been deemed unstageable, but I'm not sure: a good director can stage anything, and "Oedipus" received a notable production in 1968 by Peter Brook with Sir John Gielgud in the title role. I'm surprised Hollywood hasn't discovered Seneca, since his tragedies, though wordy, are full of the gore demanded by teenage audiences. It's a shame neither Verdi nor Puccini ever discovered "Octavia": it would have made a splendid opera libretto. T.S. Eliot compared the form of Seneca's tragedies to modern radio drama, but they also have affinities with Japanese no drama (particularly the reliance on ghosts). His influence in modern times can be seen in the works of dramatists as diverse as Richard Wagner, Eugene O'Neill, and Samuel Beckett. E.F. Watling's translations are mostly readable (though they contain occasional anachronisms) and have considerable poetic merit.

I bought this book specifically to look at the Phaedra: really good translation from the Latin in spite of the fact that this translation may be slightly liberal in its output.

Great translation of some of Seneca's best works. Well done Penguin Classics. Well done.

Great book, seller is very recommended!

Boring.

As we all know, classical rules of poetry dictate that no violence must be shown on stage, that the protagonist must be admirable except for one fatal flaw, that the declamation must be dignified and poetic. Seneca violates all of these rules, plus many others. His protagonists are nothing but shrieking hysterical fools, and the stage is awash in blood by the end of every play. As for the "poetry," it is nonexistent. Perhaps I just read a bad translation, but I still recommend that anyone who is seeking a Roman imitation of Sophocles or Aeschylus to forgo Seneca.

There is a reason that one never sees a tragedy by Seneca on stage; his works were probably never meant to be performed and the lack of any even minimal stage directions is just one of many things about these tragedies that hint at the author's likely lack of interest in ever sending his works to the theater. Tragedy was merely a useful structure in which Seneca found a way to present the underlying viewpoint of life that gave rise to his stoicism. These powerful, gruesome plays give one an impression of the world of Seneca. It is a vicious, ruthless, cruel world of intrigue, murder, insane violence and heartless people doing shameful wrongs -- and getting away with it. These plays convey an underlying perception of life on earth that was at the heart of Stoic thinkers. Indeed, the Roman world was just such a place, and Stoic philosophy sought to provide more than solace, but direction and guidance away from the omnipresent despair that one might often feel. This is the world, lacking in any real redemptive hope, that Stoicism tries to teach followers to grapple with, accept, and live in with an inner dignity, and uprightness, despite the inevitable consequences of living in such moral and ethical squalor. As plays and poetry, Seneca was a very accessible philosopher, but his writing style never won him any accolades. His plays are no more pleasant to read than his letters or other essays. They are all powerful, filled with meaning, not difficult to understand, but tedious in style. Along with Marcus Aurelius, he is one of the most easily accessible and commonly read Stoic philosophers. The introduction and considerable endnotes are very valuable and well written. Readers interested in learning something of Seneca's profound influence on later Western (particularly English) writers will find the introduction and notes of considerable

use.

And forget what you know about Seneca the Stoic. In his tragedies, the younger Seneca gives full reign to what Nietzsche later (and perhaps unrelatedly) recognized as the Dionysian: lust, anger, revenge, and unadulterated humanity in its most elemental. Although some appreciation of classical mythology is needed to enter these texts fully, once you're in them, you look around, and find yourself in a house of horrors or else in the deepest region of the unconscious. Read *Thyestes*, and you'll have the underpinning for horror and suspense from Poe to Jim Thompson to the *Blair Witch Project*. You could take my word for it, or you could listen to Seneca's admirers and imitators: Webster, Jonson, Shakespeare...

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