ca (Lucius
eus Seneca).

the flesh, which Stoics were supposed to forgo. These extremes reflect the contradictory forces that characterized Roman life during his time.

Seneca was born in Cordoba, Spain, and was sent to Rome at an early age. He studied literary criticism and explored a number of philosophies, including one based on a vegetarian diet, before beginning to write his essays on Stoicism and launching his career in politics. By 32 C.E., he was a noted orator. Caligula, the mad Roman emperor, was so envious of Seneca's oratorical skills that he considered executing Seneca and actually did exile him for 2 years, hoping that—because his health was poor—he would die abroad. Seneca was later exiled again, for 7 years, by Messalina, wife of the emperor Claudius, probably for political reasons, though the charge was adultery with the emperor's niece.

In 49 C.E., Seneca was recalled to Rome by Agrippina, Claudius's new wife, to be tutor to her son, Nero. When Nero became emperor in 54, Seneca became one of his chief advisers, running the government for 5 years and amassing a fortune. Seneca fell from power in 62, and in 65 the emperor ordered him to commit suicide (being ordered by a ruler or a court to take one's own life was a common practice in Greece and Rome). Seneca the Stoic obeyed calmly, discussing philosophy to the end.

Nine plays by Seneca—*The Trojan Women, Medea, Oedipus, Phaedra, Thyestes, Hercules on Oeta, The Mad Hercules, The Phoenician Women,* and *Agamemnon*—are the only surviving examples of Roman tragedy; all are based on Greek myths. (Individual dates for his plays are not known.) Scholars continue to debate whether Seneca's dramas were staged during his lifetime or whether he wrote them as "closet dramas" intended not for production but rather for recitation at banquets or other special events attended by royalty and the nobility.

On the surface, Seneca's plays appear to be similar to Greek tragedies. His plots are reworkings of Greek tales, and—like the Greeks—he uses a chorus. But his tragedy is quite different. His choruses are not integral to the dramatic action, and unlike Greek dramatists, he emphasizes violent spectacle. Scenes that the Greeks would have banished from the stage—stabbings, murders, suicides—are often the climactic onstage moments in Seneca's works. In his *Thyestes,* for example, Thyestes eats the flesh of his children and drinks their blood in full view of the audience; and in his *Oedipus,* Jocasta cuts out her womb and Oedipus blinds himself onstage. This interest in violent spectacle has later historical parallels, of course. Today, there are numerous examples of suspense films that emphasize brutally realistic moments of violence. Some of these—such as the films of Alfred Hitchcock (like *Psycho* and *The Birds*)—are artistically interesting. The majority, however, exploit sensational violence: hatchet murders, animals and insects that prey on humans, demonic forces let loose. Seneca, by contrast, does not exploit violence; he relates it to his themes and to the tragic circumstances of his characters.

Seneca's plays also differ from Greek tragedy in that his characters do not have a tragic flaw; instead, they are obsessed by an overwhelming emotion. In *Thyestes,* for instance, Atreus is obsessed with revenge.

Because Seneca's characters are consumed by one motive, his plays seem highly melodramatic. Supernatural beings often appear in the dramatic action, adding to this melodramatic quality. Seneca's scripts include long, detailed monologues, and his characters frequently spout moralistic axioms.

Although Seneca's popularity has never matched that of the Greek tragic dramatists, his influence on later periods is noteworthy. Seneca's tragedies, written in Latin—and therefore more accessible than the works of the Greek golden age—had a tremendous influence on Renaissance playwrights. His structure of five episodes sepa-