

ABSTRACT

The Reflections in Seneca's *De Clementia*

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Seneca's fame arises from three different personas: he was the advisor to Nero, a brilliant rhetorician, and a Stoic philosopher. Seneca employs all three of these personas in his *De Clementia*, which is a treatise advising Nero to be a virtuous -- and specifically a clement -- ruler. To accomplish his task of advising a sometimes volatile emperor, Seneca offers his treatise to Nero as though it were a mirror. Seneca claims that the image it reflects back is of Nero as someone who will be among the happiest of men. Upon a close reading of the treatise, however, one finds other reflections created by Seneca's mirror, as well as other eyes besides Nero's that will catch sight of these reflections. This thesis explores the reflections of Nero, of the Roman people, and of Seneca found in *De Clementia*. The meaning of each reflection is teased out, relating each image to its own particular audience.

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THE REFLECTIONS IN SENECA'S *DE CLEMENTIA*

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Program

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Waco, Texas

May 2013

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Yes, for the struggle to be good rather than bad is important, Glaucon, much more important than people think. Therefore, we mustn't be tempted by honor, money, rule, or even poetry into neglecting justice and the rest of virtue.

-Socrates, Republic

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Background

De Clementia is not a groundbreaking treatise with regards to its philosophy. Seneca wrote several other works similar in content.¹ The great distinction given to *De Clementia* is its audience.² Likely written sometime between 15 December 55 and 14 December 56, the treatise addresses the Roman emperor Nero, then in his nineteenth year.³ Ostensibly, *De Clementia* is a discussion of imperial conduct and mercy. Seneca directly addresses Nero, first praising him and then instructing him. As Nero is so young at the time, it is little wonder that Seneca would feel the need to write a text for his pupil to have in his possession. It would be a book Nero kept on his nightstand, Seneca might have hoped, a few pages to read and reflect on each night while going to bed. Seneca certainly made the work palatable for the young emperor. It elevates Nero's power, exalts his virtue, and encourages his growth.

Yet, despite its intimate tone, *De Clementia* cannot be understood as something so simple as bedtime reading. *De Clementia* is not a letter but a published treatise. The audience is not one but many. This realization should have an influence on our understanding of the text and Seneca's purpose.

In the opening line, Seneca offers to act as a mirror to Nero, so that he might see a reflection of himself as someone who will attain the highest pleasure.

¹ Braund, 21.

² Braund, 21 n. 5.

³ Seneca himself notes Nero's age in the text at 1.9. Griffin's appendix in her *Seneca* provides full discussion of the trustworthiness of Seneca's information as well as textual variants and the dating of the treatise.

However, given that Nero is not the only member of the audience, perhaps other readers are seeing other sorts of reflections as well. Seneca would certainly have been aware that members of the aristocracy would read *De Clementia*. A writer of his skill can be expected to have the ability to address multiple audiences, even if unnamed.

This thesis will explore the different reflections Seneca's mirror creates, one in each. First the thesis will explore the image of Seneca as he appears in the *De Clementia*. I will compare Seneca to other Stoic political theorists and demonstrate how he interprets his position in the Roman Empire. The second reflection is the only one that is clearly stated in *De Clementia*. Seneca offers Nero an image of himself as he is and might be. The primary emphasis of this reflection is to encourage Nero toward achieving Stoic virtue. The third reflection is of the people of Rome. With this image Seneca hopes to demonstrate the sort of power Nero possesses and the role that Roman people have in the state. Seneca offers the people hope that Nero will become a beneficent ruler and defends him from possible rumors against his character.

Seneca

Before anything can be said about *De Clementia*, a few things must first be said about its author. A quotation from Montaigne offers a good starting point.

Plutarch is more uniform and constant, Seneca more undulating and diverse. The latter labors, strains, and tenses himself to arm virtue against weakness, fear, and vicious appetites.⁴

⁴ Montaigne, 364.

Montaigne, when wanting to improve himself, approached these two authors over all others. Plutarch provided more substance; Seneca provided more motivation. The latter was full of wit and displayed a great range of versatility. He was intent on strengthening virtue and improving his reader. Montaigne offers the criticism that despite Seneca's burning zeal, he was given to conceding to the powers above him and would censure his beliefs so as to avoid danger. Plutarch was steadier and followed the Platonic tradition more steadily than did Seneca. This steadiness made the former more appropriate for civic life, while the latter was more suited for private virtue. Seneca provides heat and moves his readers; Plutarch satisfies the reader more and provides better instruction. "He guides us, the other pushes us."⁵

In context, Montaigne is referring to Seneca as the author of his *Letters*. Even so, Montaigne has struck upon a view of Seneca that may prove useful when considering his other works. His summation will be beneficial for my examination of *De Clementia*. Montaigne has sketched Seneca in the following way: he was a teacher of virtue and a talented motivator, entertaining while enlightening, providing a sturdy foundation for private virtue, although perhaps too concessive to political necessity. If we consider this description to be at all accurate – and I would argue that, based upon what we find in Tacitus and in Seneca's writings outside his letters, no one has ever written a more apt description of the man – then we will find a more complete understanding of Seneca's goals in the writing and publishing of *De Clementia*.

⁵ Ibid., 365.

A fuller knowledge of Seneca is still necessary. He stands as one of the most diversely achieved characters of history. He was a tutor to a Roman emperor and later his advisor. He was one of the great orators of his day. He produced celebrated tragedies. Yet even with all these achievements, his philosophical achievements overshadow his legacy. Seneca is first and foremost remembered as the great Roman Stoic, who was also adviser to Nero, and who also composed tragedies. Montaigne sketched Seneca's essence as a philosopher living within the political realm. A fuller picture of Seneca will help to tease out some of the subtly found in his writings, particularly one so complex as *De Clementia*, a text which is philosophical, political, and pedagogical in nature.⁶

Seneca the Philosopher

Stoic philosophy enjoyed a position of prominence in the Roman Empire. Augustus employed two Stoic philosophers as his advisors, and Seneca was both tutor and advisor to Nero.⁷ Emperors such as Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius encouraged the intellectual life of the empire, with the latter reestablishing Athens as an intellectual center.⁸ Roman elites saw Stoicism as a helpful guide for ethical

⁶ Miriam Griffin's work *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* remains the authoritative account of Seneca's life and should be the first destination for any more curious reader.

⁷ Gill, "The School in the Roman Imperial Period", 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

political life, and those further down the social hierarchy enjoyed the comfort it offered them even in their low standing.⁹

Ethics and comfort were not the only aspects of the school that received attention during the period. In both his *Letters* and in other treatise, Seneca often expressed interest in the Stoicism's more topics of logic and physics.¹⁰ Although Roman Stoicism on the whole did not produce much in the way of new doctrine, Roman authors did not simply translate the literature from Greek into Latin. In physics, logic, and especially ethics, philosophers composed Latin works that provided nuance to the doctrines they had received, conforming the content to better address the Roman audience.¹¹

Seneca may stand as the single most creative Latin philosopher, not content merely to transmit but intent on criticizing, combining, and innovating.¹² His tendency to reference Epicurus frequently and to criticize the Stoic school often invites questions in scholarship regarding his devotion to Stoicism.¹³ He seems to have felt free to challenge the positions of other Stoics, perhaps in part because no true school of Stoicism existed in Rome.¹⁴ Seneca investigated as many different authors as he could and considered each carefully, aligning mostly with Stoic

⁹ Ibid., 34; Hadas, *Stoic Philosophy of Seneca*, 20-21.

¹⁰ Inwood, *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters*, xviii.

¹¹ Gill, "The School in the Roman Imperial Period", 38-44.

¹² Ibid., 42, 45; Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 20.

¹³ Hadas, *Stoic Philosophy of Seneca*, 19; Gill, "The School in the Roman Imperial Period", 45, 49.

¹⁴ Gill, "The School in the Roman Imperial Period", 33.

thought, although wherever he found them lacking he brought in other teaching to fill the gaps. Despite his tendency towards sclecticism, Stoicism remained his greatest influence, as well as his self-asserted school, and it is his nuance, creativity, and his choice to write in Latin rather than Greek that make his work of such importance to understanding the progression of Stoicism throughout the Roman Empire.¹⁵

Seneca occupied many different roles throughout his life. He was

an occasionally Machiavellian political figure of great but transient power, as an eloquent orator devoted to the artfulness of fine speech as much as to its power to persuade, as a dark but brilliant poet, as a friend, son, and brother, as a philosopher of surprisingly wide interests, and as a moral advisor.¹⁶

Despite such a wide range of interest, philosophy seems always to have been his first interest.¹⁷ From his youth he was avid to receive philosophical training, and perhaps would have avoided oratory and politics altogether if not for pressure from his father.¹⁸ Even during his time in politics, Seneca was constantly reading or writing, as is evidenced by the large corpus of his works that has survived even till now.

The topics Seneca frequents most are those of ethics and self-examination. As Seneca himself notes in *De Clementia*, Stoicism had a reputation for being too

¹⁵ Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 69, 22.

¹⁶ Inwood, *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters*, xv.

¹⁷ Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

strict, a reputation that has followed it into modern times (2.5.2).¹⁹ Seneca claims to the contrary, saying that no school “is more philanthropic or more concerned about the common good – so that it is its objective to be useful, to be helpful, and to consider not only its own interest but that of the communities and individuals.”²⁰ Stoicism, with its high standards for who constitutes a sage, also known as a wise person, built within itself an understanding that very few if any can attain this status. To remain relevant, it developed flexibility within its ethical system, using the ways of the wise person as a guiding principle, while at the same time recognizing that ethics are often situational and that for most the mere attempt to imitate the wise person is as virtuous an action as they are able to take. The goal is to provide general rules of action for those who do not yet have the ability to reason rightly and who do not have proper self-knowledge.²¹

As noted by Montaigne above, Stoicism, and Senecan Stoicism especially, encourages and guides the reader towards self-knowledge.²² In his writings, Seneca is careful to write in such a way that his reader will engage in introspection. Introspection is necessary to acquire knowledge of the self, understanding one’s strengths and where one is lacking. In acquiring this self-knowledge, the goal is not an increase of guilt for one’s shortcomings. Instead, Stoicism is intent upon helping

¹⁹ Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 95. All in-text citations throughout this thesis are of *De Clementia*.

²⁰ Trans. by Braund, 147.

²¹ Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 113.

²² Edwards, “Self-Scrutiny and Self-Transformation in Seneca’s Letters”, 87.

its adherents to attain self-transformation.²³ While one likely cannot become a wise person, it is certainly possible to advance in virtue. So as Seneca states, Stoicism is quite useful to every person, for though the position of the wise person is unattainable, imitating him will still increase one's own happiness and be useful for others as they receive the benefits from the virtuous man.

Seneca the Teacher

Early in 49, Agrippina arranged Seneca's return from exile.²⁴ The Senate had condemned Seneca to the death penalty in 41 after convicting him of adultery with the younger sister of the emperor Gaius.²⁵ His punishment, however, was reduced by Claudius – purportedly under Agrippina's influence – and he had spent eight years on the island of Corsica.²⁶ Agrippina appears to have been careful to bring Seneca into her debt. She had also provided him with a praetorship upon his return. Seneca, then, would have had little choice but to take on whatever task Agrippina set him. She had already demonstrated the great influence she enjoyed over her husband, and Seneca likely would not have wanted to cross her until he could establish his own influence in the treacherous political atmosphere of Rome.

Agrippina's great political ambitions for Nero required that she surround herself with partners she believed would be both competent and loyal. She had

²³ Ibid., 92.

²⁴ Griffin, *Seneca*, 62.

²⁵ Ibid., 59.

²⁶ Dio, 60. 8, 5.

Afranius Burrus placed as the prefect over the Praetorian Guard, which would have been a major promotion, a reason to be indebted to Agrippina.²⁷ She remembered the role that the praetorians played in Claudius' own accession, and she wanted that influence on her side to ensure that Nero was favored as heir over Britannicus. These two men, Burrus and Seneca, were the two major players that Agrippina trusted not only to manage the political intrigue in the court but also to educate Nero in speech making and political guile.

Burrus was charged with instructing Nero in military matters and in the increase of discipline.²⁸ Nero needed to endear himself to the praetorians if he was to advance his standing over Britannicus. Many subtleties existed to increase influence in the court at Rome. No subtlety, though, was so secure as simple military power. That the man supported by the army exerted the most influence of the empire had been demonstrated since Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon. If Nero could at least appear to have military competence, he would take an important step in securing his position as heir to Claudius.

Given Seneca's legacy as a moral philosopher, one would expect that he, and not Burrus, would be Nero's moral guide. Seneca's conviction, whether or not he was truly guilty of the crime, might have worried Agrippina.²⁹ If Seneca had not been able to maintain his own appearance of innocence, then how could he be expected to instruct Nero? Further, Seneca had come from an upper-class family in

²⁷ Sorensen, *Seneca*, 133.

²⁸ Tacitus, *Annals*, 12.2.

²⁹ Griffin, *Seneca*, 60-61.

Spain and had been educated as an orator, while Burrus was a military man.³⁰ If Nero was to become rigorously disciplined and win military support, he needed to resemble military men as much as possible. The two men, however, did often act as partners, and so it must be expected that Seneca contributed some to the youth's moral education. If a distinction must be made, it may be that Burrus instructed Nero in manners of physical self-discipline, such as diet and exercise, while Seneca provided more instruction regarding political action and internal reflection, similar to the type of admonitions found in *De Clementia*.

Nero began his instruction in rhetoric at the age of twelve, and at the young age of fourteen was already giving speeches in the senate in both Greek and Latin.³¹ Nero's proficiency for eloquence, however, was lacking. He perhaps was too distracted by athletic and artistic ambitions, and so did not provide adequate attention to his rhetorical studies.³² After Claudius' death, Seneca's job shifted from teacher of rhetoric to speechwriter. Nero's inability to compose a quality speech became an obvious problem. Tacitus records that some of the senators complained that Nero was the first emperor who required someone else to compose his speeches.³³ Even so, Nero was only sixteen at the time of his accession, and so the fact that he still required a speechwriter should not be that surprising. What is more troubling is that Seneca continued to write his speeches well into his rule.

³⁰ Ibid., 34-43; Tacitus, *Annals*, 12.42.

³¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 12.58.

³² Griffin, *Seneca*, 64.

³³ Tacitus, *Annals*, 13.3.

After the murder of Agrippina, Nero delivered a speech in an attempted cover-up, condemning Agrippina for her ambition and claiming that she had first attempted to assassinate the emperor. According to Tacitus, the speech was not well received. Criticism fell, however, not onto Nero, but onto Seneca for the poor speech.³⁴ Despite his own eloquence, Seneca seems to have been unable to provide the same skill to Nero.

Seneca's other task was to provide political advice to Nero and Agrippina, as well as, Griffin suggests, some moral instruction.³⁵ As mentioned briefly above, this moral instruction, if it took place, likely resembled the advice found in *De Clementia*. Roman emperors after Augustus seemed to have a proclivity for excessive punishment, cruelty, and political intrigue. Seneca's desire, probably, was to attempt a rich moral education for the young ruler-to-be. Sorensen cites the story of Seneca's dream as found in Suetonius to highlight Seneca's deep desire to raise an emperor who would not behave in the same manner as his predecessors.³⁶

Seneca, however, seems not to have had the opportunity to teach Nero in the manner that he might have liked. As a member of the imperial family, Nero was, we might imagine, accustomed to receiving his way. He was well aware of his station in life, and so moderation would be a difficult characteristic to instill. Sorensen is confident that Seneca made a valiant effort to establish himself over his student, as

³⁴ Ibid., 14.11.

³⁵ Griffin, *Seneca*, 65.

³⁶ Sorensen, *Seneca*, 133: On the night that Seneca was appointed as Nero's tutor, he dreamed that he had been made Caligula's tutor, who to Seneca represented the antithesis of what he hoped to make Nero.

is evidenced by Seneca's continued presence as Nero's advisor.³⁷ But his presence was limited in its effectiveness, for, according to Tacitus, Seneca and Burrus, in a major concession to Nero's licentiousness, decided that it was for Nero to have an affair with the freedwoman Acte than for him to sleep with many different women.³⁸ Seneca could not fully control or discipline Nero, and so some concessions had to be made.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid., 134.

³⁸ Tacitus, *Annals*, 13.12. Tacitus also hints that the affair was permitted so that Agrippina's control over her son might be damaged, since she strongly disapproved of her son being involved with a freedwoman.

³⁹ Griffin, *Seneca*, 66.

CHAPTER TWO

Seneca's Own Image

Stoic Political Involvement and Kingship Theory

Since Socrates there has been a tension between the philosophical life and the political life. Socrates' contemporaries often criticized him for his neglecting positive political participation. He was mocked by comedians such as Aristophanes, who in his play, *Clouds*, accused him of being a bad influence on the young for playing rhetorical tricks and for having his head in the clouds. These accusations brought Socrates into the courts and eventually played a role in his death, which would seem like a decisive condemnation of any union between the political and philosophical lives.

Stoic philosophers suffered from the tension between the philosophical and political life. They struggled between seeking the contemplative life apart from the bustle of politics and fulfilling their obligation as citizens to participate in the city. Even amongst the rhetorical schools of Rome in the late Republic and Early Empire the maxim *sitne sapientis ad rem publicam accedere* was popular.¹ The political life required much effort and brought along many troubles, which to the philosopher were unnecessary. Far better to be away from the concerns of present troubles so that one could contemplate the eternal truths of the cosmos.

Despite the Stoic preference for the contemplative life, we find many Stoics in prominent political positions. Seneca was a chief advisor to Nero; Augustus kept

¹ "Let it not be characteristic of the wise man to come near to political matters" (Cicero, *Top.* 82; *De Or.* 3.112; Quintilian 3.5, 6), See Griffin, *Seneca*, 315.

several philosophers in his counsel; and Marcus Aurelius was himself both the emperor and a Stoic. In a letter to Lucilius, Seneca advises that he should pursue philosophy but not cast off popular convention and show contempt for politics.² How is it that Stoics balanced such commitment to their political positions while also testifying that the best life is one spent in peaceful contemplation?

The answer derives from their understanding of a person's role in the whole of the cosmos. The Stoics believed that the whole cosmos was a single, rational being, of which each person was only a part. It was the duty of each person to discover how he might best align himself with the natural order of things, which were providentially ordered. Wherever a man found himself, whether he had been given what seemed to others a good lot or a poor one, his best interest did not lay in obtaining external goods. Rather, his duty was to contemplate his particular role in the world and discover how he could best align his soul with the rational being arranging the cosmos.³

Following this general understanding of man's place in the cosmos, Epictetus advised, "If you are a town councilor, remember that you are one; if you are young, that you are young, if old, that you are old, if a father, that you are a father; on reflection, each *name* invariably suggests the appropriate task."⁴ Epictetus understood a person's duty to come from his position in life. Whatever station a

² Seneca, *ep* 73.

³ For a full discussion of Stoic theology, see Keimpe Algra's chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*. For discussion on human morality, see Malcolm Schofield's chapter in the same volume.

⁴ Epictetus, Musonius fragments II 10, 10 f.; IV 6, 26; 12, 16, translated by Brunt. Emphasis of "name" by Brunt.

person might find himself in, it is his duty to do whatever the station demands of him. This reveals the fluidity and vagueness with which the Stoics defined social duty. Rather than provide a clear, precise definition of social duty, the Stoics were content to allow contemporary mores to define a person's obligations. The quote from Epictetus above demonstrates this reliance on social convention. Epictetus does not provide a precise explanation of a person's duty as a town councilor. Rather, a position's duty is suggested by its name, which is given by social convention.

Epictetus can have such casual regard for social duty because of the Stoic belief that true value is not found in external affairs but internal reflection.⁵ As long as a person is acting according to virtue and natural order, the result of his action is largely irrelevant. Excepting the sage, no person has the ability to foretell future consequences.⁶ A person is responsible only for what he can know, and as long as he considers whether he is acting in accord with virtue, he has done all that he can. His duty is to control only what he can control, which is the alignment of his soul with the order of nature.

Their preference for the contemplative life to the political one often caused Stoics to withdraw into private life. Their disposition led many to criticize the Stoics for being apathetic towards political activity. P. Suillius accused Seneca himself of

⁵ Brunt, "Stoicism and the Principate," 11.

⁶ Ibid.

having *studia inertia*.⁷ In response to such criticisms, Epictetus claimed that within the political state Stoics could be expected to be amongst the most diligent citizens. Their commitment to align themselves to their allotted place made them, in his consideration, model citizens.⁸ Expressing the same sentiment, Seneca says, “The great mind is intent on honorable and industrious conduct in that station in which it is placed.”⁹

Their valuing internal reflection over external affairs made the Stoics very adaptable to different types of government. Because their only concerns were for the things within their control, the actions of a government could not take away from them what was truly valuable. In this way the form of government was irrelevant to the Stoic so far as his happiness was concerned. What had an effect on a Stoic's political participation was the quality of the government. If the ruler was a tyrant who gave commands contrary to the natural law, then the Stoic was forced to withdraw from political life. If, on the other hand, the ruler, whether he be a monarch or an elected official, was good, then the Stoic could happily comply with his laws and commands. In general, the Stoics did not reject any particular type of government but only those that they saw as corrupt.¹⁰

⁷ “Unmoving zeal,” per Brunt, who does not provide a reference for the Suillius quotation.

⁸ Epictetus, Musonius fragments II 10, 10 f.; IV 6, 26; 12, 16. See Brunt, “Stoicism and the Principate,” 9.

⁹ Seneca, *ep* 120.

¹⁰ Brunt, “Stoicism and the Principate,” 9.

Stoicism, throughout its history, endorsed different governments at different times. From the Early Stoa on into the Middle Stoa, the mixed constitution was in vogue. Diogenes Laertius attests that the Stoics argued for a mixture of democracy, kingship, and aristocracy.¹¹ Zeno and Chrysippus both promoted ideals found in the constitution and lifestyle of the Spartans, who operated under a mixed constitution.¹² They may have admired their constitution, but this cannot be known for sure, given that their works outlining the ideal state were not intended as models for practical implementation. It is for this reason that Cicero asserted that the Stoics of the second-century, Diogenes and Panaetius, were the first to deal with politics practically.¹³

Despite their theoretical preference for the mixed government, the Stoics were able to reconcile themselves with monarchy quite readily. This was accomplished largely through their understanding of the sage. Being the most fit to rule, the sage would naturally have become involved in ruling.¹⁴ In their stories of the origin of human society, both Posidonius and Seneca attest that the first rulers were wise men, who through their foresight and beneficence were able to provide for the weaker and determine the most expedient course of action for their society.¹⁵

¹¹ Diogenes Laertius, 7.131.

¹² Griffin, *Seneca*, 203-204.

| ¹³ Cicero, *Leg.* 3.14; Griffin, *Seneca*, 204.

¹⁴ Brunt, "Stoicism and the Principate," 16.

¹⁵ Young, "The Stoic Creed on the Origin of Kingship and of Laws," 116.

Stoicism, like many other philosophies, stressed the need for the king to be virtuous.¹⁶ Ideally, the king should be a sage. Likening the state to an organism, the Stoics reasoned that the sage would act as the mind to guide the rest of the state. This structure would most naturally mirror the natural order of the cosmos.¹⁷ If this structure is not possible, then the sage should become an advisor to the king or whatever group is in power.¹⁸ The end goal, of course, is to ensure that the king will act wisely and benevolently towards his subjects. If the king does not act in virtue and wisdom, his state will inevitably fail, just as a body fails when its reasoning part does not guide it properly (2.2.1).

Within Stoic political theory, the sage is the key to a successful kingdom. Without his wisdom and knowledge, the state will inevitably have shortcomings. It is better that the sage be a ruler; this way he can have final say on the operations of the state. If something prevents the sage from becoming a ruler, then the next best position is to be an advisor to the ruler. This position adds an element of uncertainty, since the ruler will have the power to disregard the sage's advice. Nevertheless, better he receive some wise advice than none at all.

What has to be taken into account, however, is that the Stoics did not believe that a true sage would ever exist. He stood as an ideal. In order to remain an accessible, practical philosophy, the Stoics taught that although a person could not become a sage, he should endeavor to come as close as he could. The sage was

¹⁶ Griffin, *Seneca*, 204-205.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁸ Brunt, "Stoicism and the Principate," 18.

useful because he provided a model to be emulated. So in the same way that having a sage as an advisor is preferable to the sage being uninvolved, having someone practiced in Stoic philosophy as a ruler or advisor is preferable to not.

Seneca's Appearance in De Clementia

What I have discussed thus far is the philosophical context from which Seneca draws in *De Clementia* regarding political participation, kingship, and the role of the sage. On the whole, Seneca lines up well with the Stoic tradition on these issues, but, as is often the case with Seneca, it is not his ideas that cause him to stand out but rather his inventive presentation of them. *De Clementia* creatively packages the Stoic concepts of the sage and his role in the state so that they may be comforting to and welcomed by Nero and his other readers. Seneca is at his cleverest in the way that he aligns himself with the sage. By doing so, he is assuring himself a place among the influential men in Rome. This alignment merits more exploration, and will occupy the rest of this chapter. First, I will look at the sage as he appears in Book 2 of *De Clementia*, and then I will explore the creative manner by which Seneca aligns himself with that sage.

Seneca introduces the figure of the sage through a criticism of Stoicism's ability to advise a ruler:

Scio male audire apud imperitos sectam Stoicorum tamquam duram nimis et minime principibus regibusque bonum daturam consilium. obicitur illi, quod sapientem negat misereri, negat ignoscere. Haec, si per se ponantur, invisa sunt; videntur enim nullam relinquere spem humanis erroribus, sed omnia delicta ad poenam deducere (2.5.2).

I realize that among the ill-informed the Stoic school has a negative reputation for being excessively harsh and least likely to give good advice to emperors and kings. It is criticized for saying that the wise man does not show pity or forgiveness. These ideas, if they were stated in the abstract, are horrible, because they would appear to leave human error no hope, but to refer all failures for punishment.¹⁹

Coming to the sage's defense, Seneca asserts that the opposite is actually the case. The sage, or wise man, is actually the most concerned with the public good, and no philosophical school is so lenient and practical as Stoicism.²⁰ In fact, the school's "objective (is) to be useful, to be helpful, and to consider not only its own interest but that of communities and individuals" (2.5.3). Stoic influence is clearly present in Seneca's response. Like Epictetus, Seneca believed that the Stoic sage possessed the highest qualifications for giving advice to rulers, as well as the purest intentions.

The remainder of Book 2, which we only partially possess, outlines the way that the sage would administer clemency. Seneca answers practical questions such as whether the sage ever grants pardon (2.7.1) and what the distinction is between pardon and clemency (2.7.3). He demonstrates to his reader how Stoic advice can be practical for a ruler in his decision-making. The sage does not feel pity, for that is a sickness of the mind that blinds one to the realities at hand (2.5.4 and 2.6.2), but he will assist those he can, "because he is born to benefit the community and for the

¹⁹ Trans. by Braund.

²⁰ It has been recently argued by Margaret Graver in *Stoicism and Emotion* that the Stoics were much more nuanced in their views on the emotions than has been supposed, and in general much more sympathetic. Chapter 7 of her work focuses on the Stoics' foundation in friendship and interest in others.

common good" (2.6.3).²¹ With this last phrase, Seneca is arguing very strongly that the sage should hold an influential station in the state. Not only does the sage possess wisdom, practical advice, and a desire for the public good, but the sage is actually born as a help for the public good. The sage does not merely provide help, but is himself the help. Part of the sage's nature is to be an aid to the state. The criticism that the sage would be of no help to a ruler is, in Seneca's mind, false. On the contrary, the sage is more qualified than any to help a ruler lead his state, and thus an invaluable help.

Braund notes the transition from *principibus regibusque* to *sapiens* in this portion of the treatise.²² There could be several reasons for this transition. The first is that it might be a protreptic tool to lead Nero deeper into Stoic wisdom. I will discuss this in more detail in chapter 3, which focuses on Nero. Another reason might be to provide some comfort to the Roman elite who might read *De Clementia*. Nero's youth and inexperience could have been unnerving to them, but Seneca demonstrates that the young emperor possesses an advisor that will help him in his inexperience. This second reason, however, necessitates a third reason, which will be the topic of the remainder of this chapter.

Through his discussion of the sage and the sort of advice a sage would give to an emperor, Seneca places himself in the role of the sage. When Seneca began his digression on the sage at 2.5.2, it was to defend the sage from critics. He wanted to demonstrate just how helpful the sage is to the ruler and to the state. To strengthen

²¹ *Ergo non miserebitur sapiens, sed succurret, sed proderit, in commune auxilium natus ac bonum publicum.*

²² Braund, *De Clementia*, 404.

his assertion that the sage would be helpful, he provides examples of the type of advice the sage would give to a ruler on the questions of pity and clemency. By giving these examples, Seneca is demonstrating that he himself possesses wisdom and knowledge that would be helpful to the state. Seneca is not necessarily, however, identifying himself as a sage. To do so would be antithetical to the Stoic understanding of the sage. He is simply demonstrating that he has knowledge that will be helpful to the state. And by this demonstration, he may be trying to win the trust of both Nero and of the Roman elite. His ultimate goal in doing so would be to achieve some security in his station as advisor to the emperor.²³

Seneca's Approach to Advising

One can only imagine the difficulty in advising someone with Nero's character. Kings and princes are often steeped in arrogance. They are unwilling to share praise for accomplishments, and they do not easily submit their caprice to be ruled by reason. To submit to any authority but his own would be tantamount to slavery for a king.²⁴ Consequently, the advisor has a very difficult, sometimes dangerous job.

Seneca approaches the role of advisor with inventiveness and boldness. Anticipating the dangers of advising a ruler who possesses power as great as Nero's, Seneca precedes the hortatory main body of the treatise with a brief introduction

²³ Leach, "Implied Reader," 296-297.

²⁴ Seneca recognizes the potential for Nero to see *De Clementia* as advice that places inappropriate amount of restraint on the ruler's freedom (1.8.1).

praising Nero's virtue.²⁵ He does this, presumably, to make his advice more palpable to Nero. The manner in which he presents the praise to Nero is inventive. Instead of speaking the praise himself, Seneca writes an imaginary speech for Nero, in which the emperor reflects on his own virtue (1.1.2-4). In this way, Seneca avoids possible accusations of sycophancy while still endearing his treatise to Nero.

The praise is imagined as a reflection of Nero's own virtue, with Seneca acting as the mirror.²⁶ Prior to Seneca, mirror imagery, as far as we know, had been used in two major ways. In the philosophical tradition, Plato used mirror imagery to describe life as the mirror of the soul. In the literary tradition, Alcidamas, a 4th century BC rhetorician and sophist, praised Homer's *Odyssey* as literature mirroring life.²⁷ Seneca makes use of both of these traditions. The reflection found in the Senecan mirror both provides a reflection of Nero's virtuous life (literature mirroring life) and describes how Nero's life aligns with virtue and reason (life mirroring the soul). The mirror is particularly clever because it can be interpreted both as describing Nero's virtue and as prescribing virtue in the abstract.²⁸ Seneca's mirror is intended not only to praise Nero but to offer him a look at what sort of happiness he might attain if he follows Seneca's advice (1.1.1).²⁹ Thus, the reflection

²⁵ Braund, citing Calvin (23), describes Seneca as acting "under the guise of praise," implying that the praise is not sincere (154).

²⁶ Based on her understanding of Seneca's use of the first person verb *fungerer*, Braund suggests that Seneca, rather than *De Clementia*, acts as the mirror (154).

²⁷ Fantham, *Comparative Studies in Republican Latin Imagery*, 68-69.

²⁸ Braund, *Seneca*, 154.

²⁹ *quodam modo speculi vice fungerer et te tibi ostenderem perventurum ad voluptatem maximam omnium.*

of Nero is both an image of Nero the virtuous ruler and an image of virtue in the abstract.³⁰

The latter interpretation of the Senecan mirror is evidenced later on in the treatise. After reporting an anecdote of how Nero signed the death warrants of two criminals only after painful deliberation, Seneca requests to dwell on the topic a bit longer, “not to charm your ears – after all, that is not my way: I would rather offend you with the truth than please you with flattery” (2.2.2).³¹ Seneca’s interest, he claims, is not in flattery. Even when he tells a story of something Nero actually did, Seneca’s purpose is to point out some virtue above the deed itself. This quotation can as easily be applied to the praise of Nero at the start of *De Clementia* as the praise at the start of Book 2. Seneca’s interest is not strictly in winning Nero’s favor through flattery and sycophancy. Rather, he wants to put before Nero an image of virtue for him to emulate.

The Senecan mirror provides us with a glimpse of Seneca’s understanding of his role as an advisor to Nero. Following the tradition of Stoic philosophy, Seneca believed that Stoicism had many helpful things to provide to a ruler. Nero’s inexperience would require a great amount of assistance, and so Seneca took on the role of the Stoic advisor. *De Clementia* demonstrates that Seneca took his job very seriously. He was not merely intent on maintaining his position of great influence through flattery, but intended to provide real advice to Nero, even if it should offend him. Thus Seneca demonstrates that while he felt a strong responsibility to engage

³⁰ Braund, *Seneca*, 154.

³¹ *non ut blandum auribus tuis (nec enim hic mihi mos est; maluerim veris offendere quam placere adulando).*

in political life, his first obligation was to virtue and truth, following the duty of the Stoic sage.

CHAPTER THREE

Nero's Reflection

Seneca's High Praise of Nero

The historical tradition concerning Nero must certainly be counted among the most critical of any handed down in the western tradition. Ancient histories, beginning immediately upon Nero's death, list crime after crime, mounting one on the other. In their accounts, as soon as Nero has begun an affair, he has raped and murdered his brother. One night he and his gang beat citizens in the street; the next he sleeps with his mother, only to have her killed the week after. He makes mockery of his imperial status by performing in the theater, and then belittles burning Rome with songs of Troy. He makes sycophants and drunkards his advisors and burns the innocent to disguise his own crimes. Such is the legacy of Nero: revolting, wicked, and irredeemable.

In contrast, the reflection of Nero throughout *De Clementia* is that of a paragon of virtue, innocent and budding with desire for the flourishing of mankind under his reign. Nero has done no wrong, nor does he have any desire to do so. He is so far from wanting to bring harm to anyone that he grieves even that he must consent to the execution of criminals. Surely Seneca is holding up a carnival mirror, distorting the reflection of a man awful to look on so that he resembles a god. How can the image of Nero offered by Seneca in *De Clementia* be taken seriously?

An initial defense of Seneca is that Nero's reign early on seems to have been good. Seneca published *De Clementia* in AD 56.¹ Nero had held power for only two years.² The first five years or so of Nero's reign have been considered good, both in ancient and modern times.³ The vast majority of Nero's legacy was yet to come. It would be anachronistic to charge Seneca with misrepresenting a tyrant when Nero did not clearly become one for years to come.

The difficulty with this view is that it is an oversimplification. Nero was hardly innocent at the time of *De Clementia's* publication. He had already poisoned Britannicus, his stepbrother, and apparently purely out of spite for his mother, Agrippina. She resented the fact that Nero had begun to take control of the empire, so she threatened to make sure Britannicus, who was a blood descendent of Claudius and not merely adopted, reclaimed the empire.⁴ Even before the actual murder (an earlier attempt at poisoning Britannicus was unsuccessful) Tacitus accuses Nero of despoiling the boy, who was several years his junior for the sole purpose of shaming him.⁵ These are certainly not the deeds of an innocent young man intent upon pursuing virtue, as the speech placed in Nero's mouth by Seneca claims (1.1.2-4).

¹ Braund, *De Clementia*, 16-17.

² Griffin, *Nero*, 32-33.

³ In modern scholarship this view is discussed by Griffin, *Seneca*, 67,118; and Veyne, *Seneca*, 20. Ancient testimony of Nero's good start can be found in Tacitus, *Annales*, 13.2; 13.4-5.

⁴ Tacitus, *Annales*, 13.14.

⁵ *ibid.*, 13.17.

In the introduction of her edition of *De Clementia*, Susanna Braund, conceding Nero's crime, offers a few possible explanations for Seneca's praise of the emperor.⁶ The first possibility is that Seneca was genuinely ignorant of the crime. The official story was that Britannicus had died of an epileptic fit, which at the time could have been credible, especially if the assassination was secretive. When Nero later attempts to murder his mother by means of a collapsing ship, Tacitus makes clear that Seneca and Burrus were both ignorant of Nero's plot, stunned into silence as they were when Nero told them in a panic that his plan had failed.⁷

Some evidence, then, does exist to support the idea that Nero would leave one of his chief advisors in the dark even concerning the murder of a prominent person, but it is difficult to imagine that Seneca would not have been able to piece things together on the basis of the rumors of Nero's involvement.⁸ Addressing this probability, Braund suggests that Seneca, at least in part, may have published *De Clementia* in order to stymie the rumors and save Nero's reputation.⁹ He did not want a panic to break out among Rome's leading citizens, who might begin to fear that, as young as he was, Nero had begun to imitate his predecessors' habit of killing those whom he perceived as obstacles; or even if he did murder Britannicus, Nero would not visit the same sort of violence on the people.¹⁰ To stymie the

⁶ Braund, *De Clementia*, 17.

⁷ Tacitus, *Annales*, 14.7.

⁸ Shotter, *Nero*, 61.

⁹ Braund, *De Clementia*, 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

consequences of such a rumor, whether true or not, Seneca felt it was necessary to make a bold statement concerning the emperor's character, both through the voice of the emperor and through his own pen.

Whether Seneca's purpose in offering Nero lavish praise was among those listed above is too difficult to say with certainty. Tacitus gives us reason, however, to have some confidence that Seneca had some purpose beyond sycophancy. Just before Seneca was forced to commit suicide in AD 64, he was offered a chance to deny that he had communicated with the conspirators. Using indirect speech, and thus taking on the appearance of a reporter rather than commenter, Tacitus records that Seneca acknowledged the communication and that his nature was not well disposed towards sycophancy. Switching out of indirect speech and into what appears to be his own voice, Tacitus writes, "This was known by no one more than Nero, who had experienced more often Seneca's frankness than his servility."¹¹ Tacitus was convinced that Seneca was accustomed to speaking his mind to Nero. If this were indeed the case, it would seem odd for Seneca to have taken up the practice of sycophancy in a published work without a further purpose behind it.

The Opening Speech

Seneca opens his treatise on clemency by putting a speech into Nero's mouth. It is part panegyric, part self-reflection. It is a composition of Seneca's, and thus a panegyric praising Nero, but Seneca's choice to use Nero's voice adds elements of self-reflection. Each piece adds to the opening of the work.

¹¹ Tacitus, *Annales*, 15.61: *idque nulli magis gnarum quam Neroni, qui saepius libertatem Senecae quam servitium expertus esset.*

Seneca's praise of Nero follows two traditions. The first is that of Isocrates and his prose encomium.¹² In 365 BC Isocrates gave a eulogy of Evagoras, the king of Salamis in Cyprus. Isocrates revolutionized the genre of eulogizing rulers by delivering his praise in prose rather than meter. Seneca's panegyric clearly falls within this tradition.

The second, and nearer, tradition to which this speech belongs is the same to which Pliny's *Panegyricus* belongs.¹³ This genre varies from Isocrates' prose encomium in that it praises a living rather than dead ruler. Pliny's reasoning for this, expressed in a letter, is that he wished to encourage the virtues of the ruler and to provide an example to the ruler's successors. Seneca certainly seems to be aligning with the reasoning found in Pliny, but he adds unique elements of divergence

Seneca modifies the genre by putting the panegyric into Nero's mouth. Rather than deliver praise of Nero's virtue and power in his own voice, Seneca employs Nero's. This is ironic for the fact that Seneca was Nero's speechwriter, but it also permits Seneca to accomplish two things. The first is that Seneca himself is not offering the extraordinarily high praise found in this section. He is avoiding the impression of flattery as best he can.¹⁴ Since he has not offered the praise directly, he maintains his credibility, so that he can come in later in the treatise and gently

¹² Braund, *De Clementia*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

correct what are introduced as Nero's thoughts.¹⁵ Seneca never disagrees or contradicts what is said here of Nero's power and virtue. He does, however, point out that some limitations do exist to the emperor's power and that his virtue can continue to grow. Seneca has created an image of the two of them as though they are in private instruction with the student and teacher holding conversation. Secondly, by having Nero deliver the speech, Seneca is also able to present Nero as an introspective, considerate ruler. This Nero takes care to consider the world about him and his proper role in it. Despite the grandiose statements of power over the nations and the citizens of his empire, the Nero of this speech recognizes the boundaries and restraints that he is obliged to observe. He recognizes the power of the gods and his duty to rule piously as their representative to the world (1.1.2, 1.1.4).¹⁶ He has been selected because of his virtue, and it is only by continuing in virtue that he can confidently approach them should they demand an account.

The Nero of the speech is the image to which Seneca refers in his opening line (1.1.1). If Nero can become like the image Seneca presents, then he will achieve the greatest pleasure of all. Nero can only attain this image, however, if he adapts the virtues that Seneca is suggesting.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Egone ex omnibus mortalibus placui electusque sum, qui in terris deorum uice fungerer?... hodie dis immortalibus, si a me rationem repentant, adnumerare genus humanum partus sum*: "Have I of all mortals proved good enough and been chosen to act as the god's representative on earth?... If the deathless gods should require a reckoning from me, I am ready today to account for all of mankind" (Trans. by Braund).

The Role and Implications of Clemency

The virtue of greatest emphasis, both in the speech and throughout the treatise, is clemency. Seneca regarded this virtue as particularly suitable for a ruler.¹⁷ His reasons can be found scattered throughout the treatise. A look at clemency as it appears in Nero's speech, however, will help to reveal Seneca's primary reason for associating clemency with the ruler. The speech acts as a microcosm of the treatise at large.¹⁸ It should not be surprising that a trend found within the speech should be found throughout the work.

Seneca begins the speech by having Nero remark upon his great power. The whole first half of the speech is dedicated to various descriptions of Nero's power. Nero is granted control of life and death, the destruction and prosperity of kingdoms, and the well-being and prosperity of individuals (1.1.2). He has an army at his disposal that can conquer any kingdom and enslave any king. Nero, by the election of the gods, has power over the entire world. As Nero desires it, so the world will be.

At this point, the speech transitions from the scope of Nero's power to his use of it. Nero, as Seneca portrays him, is not given to striking out in anger or frustration at his obstinate people, or demonstrating his power through terror (1.1.3). Rather, Nero has his sword sheathed. He is slow to spill the blood of the worst offender, and the mere fact of their humanity is enough reason to show

¹⁷ Griffin, *Seneca*, 217.

¹⁸ Braund, *De Clementia*, 159.

mercy. It is here that *clementia* makes its first appearance. Nero juxtaposes severity and clemency, hiding one and keeping the other nearby (1.1.4).¹⁹

These two sections identify the two major characteristics of a good ruler: power and clemency. While Seneca might not have thought it ideal that a king rule over Rome, he seems to have resigned himself to the system that was in place.²⁰ He demonstrates his concession to Nero's position indirectly. Seneca frequently interchanges the terms *princeps* and *rex*, though he never directly grants the title of *rex* to Nero. Seneca merely seems to have accepted that the two words had become synonymous in the Julian Empire. If Rome was to survive, Nero must be wholly in control, and he must be clement.

The appropriate way for Nero to use his power as ruler, however, is with restraint. The speech depicts a Nero who has realized the necessity of clemency in his rule. In the speech, Nero identifies two reasons that he maintains clemency as often as he can. The first has been mentioned already. Nero has an obligation to the gods as their representative. He understands that he must give an account not only for himself but also for the state of the world as he has caused it to be. The second reason is that clemency has become a delight to him. When he cannot find a reason to show mercy to a man who deserves punishment, he has mercy on himself (1.1.4).²¹

¹⁹ *seueritatem abditam, at clementiam in procintu habeo.*

²⁰ Griffin, *Seneca*, 206-7.

²¹ *quotiens nullam inueneram misericordiae causam, mihi peperci.*

It is vital that Nero find pleasure in the virtue itself. The people over whom he rules are identified as obstinate and difficult (1.1.3). They are liable to destroy others and themselves if they are not ruled over (1.1.1). Pity for the sake of such a people as this is not always possible. Without some innate pleasure in the virtue itself, his patience would be stretched too thin, like most other rulers (1.1.3).²² Thus, Nero must employ clemency for the sake of the people and his own sake.

The most effective manner of controlling such a riotous people, in Seneca's opinion, is to do so with great care. He must wield his great power thoughtfully and beneficently (1.3.3).²³ If the people are provoked, they might break the yoke keeping them from destruction. Clemency endears the ruler to his people. Rather than using their numbers to destroy the state, they will use it to protect the ruler and preserve their prosperous condition (1.3.3). In order to control this wild mass, Nero must have both unequalled power and clemency.

In the main body of the treatise, Seneca provides an important analogy to convey to Nero the importance of showing clemency to the state. Just as the mind, whose location and substance is unknown, controls the much larger, sturdier body, so the ruler controls the state (1.3.5). Seneca mentions this analogy six more times throughout the treatise, indicating the great importance that Seneca places on the image.²⁴ The analogy emphasizes the sort of control that Nero possesses over the

²² *quae saepe tranquillissimis quoque pectoribus patientiam extorsit.*

²³ *Ita enim magnae vires decori gloriaeque sunt, si illis salutaris potentia est.*

²⁴ Braund, *De Clementia*, 207.

state. He is able to command it to do harm even to itself (1.3.5).²⁵ Without him the body cannot function and will disintegrate (1.4.1). As a proof text, Seneca quotes two lines from Virgil's *Georgics* 4.212-13: "When their king is safe, they acts with one mind. / When he has gone, they break their pact."²⁶ Immediately following this quotation, Seneca declares that should Rome experience such a disaster the peace will be destroyed along with the prosperity of the people. As long as the people submit to and defend their ruler, so long will Rome flourish. Thus, it is necessary that Nero treat the people well, so that they have as much reason as possible to defend and obey him. Later in the treatise, Seneca tells Nero that clemency is desirable not merely for the glory that it brings for more the safety it grants to the ruler (1.11.4).

Seneca draws further on this analogy to demonstrate to Nero the great importance of treating the people well. If the state is the body of the ruler, then by showing mercy and clemency to the state he shows mercy to himself (1.5.1). He should seek to heal ailing limbs and bleed only so much as is necessary. Clemency is the medicine by which he can restore those parts of the body that have failed. Nero himself benefits from clemency. The mind/body analogy helps to give the impression that his benefit will be in a very tangible sense.

Seneca heightens the importance of clemency in the ruler. All humans possess the capacity for clemency, but the ruler has the greatest capacity because he has the greatest power (1.5.2). In granting clemency, the ruler shows more restraint

²⁵ *iam dudum destram flammis obieimus aut uoluntarii.*

²⁶ Braund, *De Clementia*, 214. *rege incolumi mens omnibus una, / amisso rupere fidem.*

than anyone. His power is unrestricted, while that of others is private and small. The ruler has the ability to avenge any wrong, and it is worthy of amazement when he does not use his power to full effect for the sake of the offender. If the ruler should so choose, his anger might become war. Self-restraint is the only sort of boundary that the ruler will encounter. Returning again to a theme from the opening speech, Seneca suggests that Nero imitate the gods (1.7.1). They are not implacable and unforgiving of the mistakes of men. If they were, men would become hostile to the gods and become enemies rather than worshippers. Nero's power resembles that of the gods. He, too, ought to be willing to show clemency rather than rush to punishment. Are not clear skies more attractive, Seneca says, than skies filled with crashing clouds and fire (1.7.2)?

Such are the effects of clemency: it brings about fame and safety to the ruler and prosperity to the people. These benefits are extrinsic. Seneca has thus far delivered his treatise just as he promised in his opening lines. There he said that although there is no better benefit from excellence than excellence itself, it is also a pleasure to look about oneself and consider one's place in the world. Book 1 of *De Clementia* is almost entirely devoted to these extrinsic goods. He has examined the role of the ruler amongst his people and how he might best conduct himself.

Book 2 marks a subtle shift in purpose and offers some defense for what Seneca has said about clemency thus far. Seneca examines misconceptions others have of clemency and of how a king ought to rule. As part of this response to misunderstandings, Seneca addresses criticism brought against Stoic advice to

rulers (2.5.2).²⁷ Some, he says, think Stoicism too harsh and strict to be applied by a ruler. The wise man shows no pity or forgiveness. Seneca disagrees, saying that no school of philosophy is more kind, lenient, or friendlier to humanity.²⁸

In this subtle moment, Seneca has changed the object of this discussion. His discussion moves from the ruler to the wise man. For the remainder of the extant work, Seneca devotes his efforts to explaining the way in which a wise man, or sage, would execute justice as a ruler. The sage that Seneca discusses shares duties and characteristics to the ruler as described in Book 1. The sage is concerned for the community and the common good, and he is like a god in his mercy (2.6.3). He will seek to restore those who are injured and make the crooked straight (2.7.4).

I suggest that Seneca has moved into a more protreptic mode. He is outlining the great character of the sage and the great benefit to the state the sage would bring as a ruler. Seneca is drawing Nero towards the life of the sage. If the third book were not missing, perhaps we might see this movement progress.

This chapter has examined the image that Seneca displays to Nero of himself as he is as can become. Seneca recognizes Nero's great power and his desire for virtue.²⁹ Throughout the treatise Seneca attempts to show Nero the sort of ruler that he ought to become both for his own sake and for the sake of the people.

²⁷ *Scio male audire apud imperitos sectam Stoicorum tamquam duram nimis et minime principibus regibusque bonum daturam consilium; obiectur illi quod sapientem negat miserere, negat ignoscere.*

²⁸ Graver examines the Stoic foundations for friendship and interest in others in Chapter 8 of her *Stoicism and Emotions*.

²⁹ Griffin notes that Nero seems really to have tried to live out Seneca's instruction in the early years of his reign (*Seneca*, 123, 170-1).

Subtly, Seneca leads the discussion away from that of the ruler and into that of the sage, presenting Nero with an image of himself not merely as a king but as a Stoic wise man.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Implied Audience

De Clementia is, at first glance, directed only towards Nero. He is explicitly addressed in the opening, and throughout the treatise he remains the clear recipient of Seneca's advice. It seems likely, however, that Seneca understood that his audience would be wider than the emperor only. Some things in *De Clementia* seem to be directed towards the Roman aristocracy. For instance, their role as subjects of the emperor is outlined. *De Clementia* differs greatly from Nero's accession speech in Tacitus, also written by Seneca, regarding the equality of power between the princeps and the senate. In the speech, Nero focused heavily on a partnership between the emperor and the senate. *De Clementia* ignores such a partnership entirely in favor of a singular ruling power. Moreover, the treatise addresses some rumors of Nero's faults and immaturities. It seeks to defend the emperor from rumors that he is assaulting strangers in the streets at night. *De Clementia* would have been both an unsettling and comforting work for the Roman aristocracy. While it solidifies Nero's immense power, it also provides some reassurance that Nero will become a good ruler, fully capable of leading Rome to prosperity, so long as both Nero and the people take Seneca's advice.

The Implied Audience

The idea that *De Clementia* may have been written for an audience besides Nero is a fairly recent one.¹ The treatise is clearly addressed to Nero and remains so throughout the work. Seneca never changes his addressee. He never changes his subject from that of a successful ruler. His use of the second person is prevalent. His style may even be seen as alienating towards readers besides Nero, describing those whom Nero overlooks as *immensam multitudinem* alongside adjectives such as *discordem*, *seditionem*, and *impotentem* (1.1.1).² If Seneca intended to reach an implied audience, his purpose was certainly not to flatter them.

What seems clear upon reading the treatise is that it had something to say to readers who were not the emperor. Certainly possible readers existed who would have had interest in the content of the treatise.³ For every piece of advice given to Nero, there is reciprocal advice to the people. If Nero is described as the head and the people the body, his readers would be interested to discover what it means for them to be the body. What is expected of them? What might they expect from the head? Seneca subtly provides answers to these questions.

Most likely the implied audience of *De Clementia* was simply the Roman aristocracy, the educated Roman elite. Education and literacy would have been more prevalent among the wealthier citizens, who would have been able to afford

¹ Leach, "Implied Reader and the Political Argument in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* and *De Clementia*", 267. Sorenson, 1984 considers it to have been written solely to Nero.

² Seneca calls them "quarrelsome, factious, and without self-control."

³ Leach, 266.

tutors and educators.⁴ If Seneca hoped to impart a subtle message to an unnamed, implied audience, it would have to have been among a group capable of subtle reading. Even if a base level of literacy existed in Rome for the purposes of voting and legal proceedings, a deeper understanding of rhetoric and literary subtlety would have been necessary to grasp Seneca's message.⁵ The implied audience of *De Clementia*, then, seems likely to have belonged to the Roman elite.

More specifically, though not exclusively, the senatorial class might have found the treatise particularly relevant. Nero's accession speech, written by Seneca, had made a point of calling on the aid of the Senate. The princeps and the Senate were to be partners in rule. Just two years later *De Clementia* seems to have dismissed this partnership entirely.⁶ No mention is made of the Senate nor of any sort of third entity distinguished from the princeps and the people. This omission will prove to be significant to understanding the political message being delivered to the implied audience.

A New Power Structure

Seneca does not shy away from discussing Nero's position as one nearing or equivalent to kingship. The term *rex* is pervasive, and although Seneca never names Nero as *rex* directly, he discusses the term as something more than an abstract

⁴ Scheidel and Friesen, "The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire", *Journal of Roman Studies*, 2009; Johnson and Parker's *Ancient Literacies* has several chapters devoted to the study of literacy in Rome.

⁵ Best, "Literacy and Roman Voting," 1974 discusses the basic level of literacy necessary to participate in the Roman voting system.

⁶ Griffin, *Seneca*, 141.

concept. *De Clementia* makes clear that Nero is much nearer to being a king than a consul.

Griffin suggests that the image of the princeps laid out by Seneca would have been largely acceptable to readers. She makes this assessment based on her understanding of *De Clementia* as Seneca's attempt to reassure the public.⁷ While it is true that portions of the treatise are certainly meant to be reassuring, it is not necessarily the case that the concept of a king-like ruler was comforting to the readers. Indeed, Seneca's treatment of the implied audience would seem to suggest that the ideas of kingship he discusses would have been distasteful, as Leach suggests.⁸

The position of implied reader bears with it some negative connotation. It pushes the reader into the status of an "accidental overhearer."⁹ The treatise is addressed to a single, named reader, presumably the ideal audience. Any other reader is placed on the outside looking in. He is listening at the crack to hear what Seneca has to tell Nero. There is no advice directed towards him, and nothing is said about him that he would likely enjoy hearing.

The images Seneca employs do not place the implied reader in much of an admirable position. As non-ruler, the reader is part of the body reliant on the head. He is a worker under the directive of the king bee (1.19.2). He is totally dependent upon the one ruling him. Far from self-sustaining, the non-ruler is self-destructive

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Leach, 287.

⁹ Ibid.

(1.4.2).¹⁰ He is weak, vulnerable, and needy. If the king were to perish, the non-ruler would die along with him (1.4.1).¹¹

Much of the content of *De Clementia* would also be discomforting to the implied reader. Already noted above is the omission of the senatorial class in the description of the state. Seneca has moved away entirely from the model of the Roman Republic towards that of empire and monarchy. The senatorial class has no power in this sort of state. Despite their wealth and position, they are as much at the mercy of the princeps as any other citizen. The opening speech makes this equality clear. Towards the end of the speech, Nero lists the various reasons he finds to be clement as often as possible. Among these reasons he says, “At one time I give to the one worthy of regard and at another to the lowly” (1.1.4).¹² The status of the recipient does not have a bearing on Nero’s clemency.

Seneca is subtly removing any station between the princeps and the people. Within this treatise, the prosperous state is comprised of only two parts. By breaking the state down into these two components, Seneca creates a one-sided power structure. The ruler holds complete control of the state. The people, for the sake of their own prosperity, ought simply to obey. The gap between the emperor and the people becomes enormous. He is like a god fixed in the sky, nailed to his

¹⁰ *tam diu ab isto periculo aberit hic populus, quam diu sciet ferre frenos...idemque huic urbi finis dominandi erit, qui parendi fuerit.*

¹¹ *ille spiritus vitalis, quem haec tot milia trahunt nihil ipsa per se futura nisi onus et praeda.*

¹² *alium dignitati donavi, alium humilitati.*

position as emperor (1.8.3). Nero's power far transcends that of any other member of the state.

Neither is Nero's power entirely safe for the people. Seneca offers several mentions of the dangers of an angry ruler. The first mention comes in the opening speech (1.1.3).¹³ Nero notes the immense power that he wields. He follows by boasting that anger has not driven him to unjust action, despite the stubbornness and iniquity of the people. Importantly, Nero notes that often those in his position are unable to accomplish such serenity.¹⁴ His virtue is rare, and the people's security is entirely predicated on his maintaining his virtue. Nero must battle against violent passions in order to provide security to the rest of the state. These passions are in a direct relationship with the obstinacy and discord of the people.¹⁵ The more troublesome the people become, the more likely Nero is to lose his temper. The implication found in the opening speech is that the people have been very obstinate and Nero has exercised a great deal of patience so far in his rule.

The relationship of the ruler and the people is reciprocal, but all the power lies on the side of the ruler. Later on in the treatise, Seneca builds on this description of the ruler's power. He marks the degree of difference between the power of the ruler and that of an individual citizen. The ferocity of the private citizen can do only a small amount of damage, but the rage of princes is war (1.5.2).

¹³ *in hac tanta facultate rerum non ira me ad iniquia supplicia compulit.*

¹⁴ *Quae saepe tranquillissimis quoque pectoribus patientiam extorsit.*

¹⁵ Leach, 293.

At 1.5.5 Seneca again pairs the image of the serene ruler with the potential for violence and destruction.

The primary purpose of these examples is to guide Nero toward becoming a good, clement ruler. The backdrop, however, is the terrible power that he holds and that the people must do their best to avoid. Thus Leach, reflecting on the relationship between clemency and power, writes, “Absolute power is the dark side of clemency.”¹⁶ While the content of *De Clementia* is reassuring at first glance, the context of clemency and the position of the ruler can be fearful and unsettling for the implied audience.

De Clementia touches on another subject that might have been disturbing to its readers. For the most part, the treatise discusses matters purely in the abstract, exhorting the benefits that clemency could bring to a ruler and his city and the reasoning behind these benefits. As a literary work, however, *De Clementia* was a published within a specific historical context and addressed to a specific, real person. By pairing the treatise with certain concurrent events one will begin to wonder what a reader’s reaction would have been. In particular, in his discussion of cruelty and barbarity, Seneca uses the example of the beating of strangers at night, an act of which Tacitus accuses Nero. A brief look at what Seneca has to say on the subject and some consideration of Nero’s night outings will serve to demonstrate how Seneca provides indirect commentary on the emperor’s questionable pastime.

¹⁶ Leach, 286-7.

Within his discussion of cruelty (*crudelitas*), Seneca describes something he says is often mistaken for cruelty: brutality (*feritas*).¹⁷ The distinction between the two is found in the context in which the savage action is taken. Cruelty is an overreaction to a wrong done. It is an excess of punishment. Brutality is violent action against a person for no reason. No wrongdoing is being avenged. Instead, the perpetrator acts out of a lust for violence (*saevitia*). What is intriguing about this section of the treatise is Seneca's example of brutality:

Sed quidam non exigunt poenas, crudeles tamen sunt, tamquam qui ignotos homines et obvios non in compendium, sed occidendi causa occidunt nec interficere contenti saeviunt, ut Busiris ille et Procrustes et piratae, qui captos verberant et in ignem vivos imponunt.

But there are some people who do not exact punishment but who are cruel all the same, like the men who kill strangers whom they meet not to rob them but for the sake of killing. And, not satisfied simply with murdering, they behave savagely, like the notorious Busiris and Procrustes and the pirates who lash their captives and burn them alive.¹⁸

Seneca's purpose in discussing brutality and cruelty, we may suppose, is to lead Nero away from such activity. He hopes to make it clear that violence, as a display of power, is not to the benefit of the ruler or to the people. Violence and cruelty, in fact, bring about the destruction of rulers of their states (1.26.1). Seneca describes in vivid detail the condition of the state ruled by a cruel prince (1.26.2). Even if the ruler is cruel without risk to himself, he causes great confusion and fear in his

¹⁷ 2.4.1-2.

¹⁸ Trans. by Braund.

citizens.¹⁹ It is as though a wild animal is in control, rather than a true ruler.²⁰

Approaching the melodramatic, Seneca suggests that violence against individuals will eventually lead to genocide.²¹

Seneca's detailed discussion of brutality, on its own, is not definite proof that he personally saw Nero engaged in the behavior he described. The discussion of a virtue's opposite within the same treatise is appropriate and could, theoretically, explain his descriptions.²² But the corroboration of some of the particular detail in Tacitus would seem to suggest that Seneca knew of the behavior.

Only eighteen at the time the treatise was published, Nero may have been tempted to enjoy the entertainments of others his age. One popular activity was to venture out into the streets at night and assail random passers-by. Usually this happened after a party where the young men drank enough wine to get drunk.²³ These outings seem to have been simply part of being a young man in Rome and proving oneself to one's peers. Not much is made of them in scholarship as anything more than a right of passage.²⁴ Perhaps Seneca was anticipating Nero's desire to join his peers in these outings and wants to make clear to Nero that his exalted

¹⁹ *Non aliud quam captarum urbium forma et terribiles facies publici metus. Omnia maesta, trepida, confusa.*

²⁰ *Quae alia vita esset, si leones ursique regnarent, si serpentibus in nos ac noxiosissimo cuique animali daretur potestas?*

²¹ *a singulorum deinde caedibus in exitia gentium serpit.*

²² Cf. Philodemus' treatise, *On Vices and their Corresponding Virtues*.

²³ Eyben, *Restless Youth in Ancient Rome*, 107; Plautus, *Amphitryon*, 120.

²⁴ Veyne, *Seneca*, 21.

position prevents him from participating in normal youthful activities, especially those that are violent.

Nevertheless, evidence exists that Nero did participate in these outings. Tacitus records that during the consulships of Quintus Volusius and Publius Scipio, Nero began the practice of taking a gang with him out at night into the city, stealing goods and assaulting strangers at random.²⁵ He began innocently enough, following the normal patterns of behavior for a boy his age. Just as Seneca predicts, however, escalation was imminent. After being roughed up a few times, Nero began taking a small retinue of guards with him to ensure his protection in case his victims fought back too valiantly. A low-point in these outings occurred when one night Nero was beaten up by a senator whose wife he had attempted to berate. The senator later recognized whom he had beaten and, foolishly, wrote a letter of apology. In order to hide his activities from public exposure, Nero had the senator commit suicide.²⁶

If Tacitus' account can be trusted, as well as Seneca's reference to Nero's age at the time of writing *De Clementia*, then both Nero's outings and the publishing of *De Clementia* occurred in AD 56. A more precise chronology is harder to attain. Nero's outings are the first activities Tacitus records in the Quintus Volusius and Publius Scipio' consulships, and so perhaps Nero began his outings early in the consulship. If this were the case, it would make it likely that Seneca was writing *De Clementia* while Nero was still engaging in this activity.

²⁵ Tacitus, *Annales*, 13.25. Suetonius, *Nero*, 26.1.4, Dio Cassius, 61.8.1, and the Elder Pliny, *N.H.* 13.43.136 join Tacitus in reporting Nero's nightly entertainment, per Eyben, 109.

²⁶ Eyben, *Restless Youth in Ancient Rome*, 109.

Whatever the chronology might be, Seneca is either (correctly) anticipating Nero's involvement in normal youthful activities or addressing it, however indirectly. Surely Seneca would have addressed these activities with the young emperor in private. Why, then, might he have felt the need to include an example of brutality so similar to Nero's actual activity?

It is here that the presence of an implied audience can help supply context. Following Griffin's inclination that *De Clementia* was written partially as reassurance to the public, it may be the case that Seneca intended to address the matter publicly and delicately. Suetonius in his account suggests that the public did not look on Nero's actions as consequences of his immaturity but instead as a defect in his character.²⁷ Tacitus makes clear that the public learned of Nero's outings, and that a few had begun to imitate him to avoid capture and punishment. Nero was causing a stir in the public, increasing public fear and dislike. Seneca may have felt the problem needed to be addressed while also denying – or at least discrediting – its occurrence.²⁸

Every image of Nero in the *De Clementia* is one of virtue. The opening speech is the prime example, where Seneca has Nero declare his own virtue and his reluctance towards any sort of violence. Elsewhere Seneca compliments the young Nero as milder than Augustus at his prime and praises him for his grief at having to

²⁷ Ibid., 109-110.

²⁸ Veyne glosses over Nero's night outings, suggesting that to the Romans this sort of thing was a right of passage for the youth, and that the aristocracy "smilingly granted" Nero his desire (21). Nothing in *De Clementia*, a work written in the midst of this very trouble, would suggest that Seneca would have looked upon the matter so glibly.

condemn even criminals to death (1.11.1 and 2.1.1 respectively).²⁹ With this image of Nero, Seneca prompts his reader to think, “Certainly, someone with this sort of character would not go out at night to assault passers-by.” Seneca was, perhaps, constructing a public image of Nero in order to discredit some of the rumors circulating about Nero’s nightly outings.

In addition, *De Clementia* can be seen as a representation of the sort of education Nero is receiving from Seneca. Even if Nero were engaging in an illicit activity, Seneca is close at hand to advise and correct the young emperor. Seneca’s defense of Stoic advice for rulers, as well as his shift toward a discussion of the wise man in Book 2, is intended to provide assurance to the general reader that Nero is in good hands. Seneca’s treatment of cruelty and brutality make it clear that he opposes them and clearly understands that violent behavior is unbecoming of an emperor.³⁰ With him as counselor, Nero will revert to the proper course. Any incident that may have occurred already will be addressed, and an endeavor will be made to correct his behavior.

There can be little doubt that Seneca considered it part of his job to maintain Nero’s public image. As Nero’s speechwriter, Seneca was responsible for helping Nero make a favorable impression on the Senate and the Roman people at large. The greatest challenge to this responsibility came years after the publication of *De Clementia*, after Nero ordered the murder of his mother, Agrippina. If Seneca was

²⁹ Seneca, *De Clementia*, 1.11.1, 2.1.1.

³⁰ Ibid., 1.7.4: “People of humble status are freer to use violence, enter into disputes, rush into a brawl and indulge their anger – blows between equals are insignificant. For a king, even to shout or to use intemperate language is not appropriate to his grandeur” (Braund, 2009 translation).

willing to write a speech attempting to deny Nero's involvement in such a violent, despicable crime as matricide, it seems very much within his character to publish a work that would attempt to ward off unwanted rumors of Nero's night outings. Seneca was highly aware of public opinion and its importance. *De Clementia* was intended for an implied audience as much as for Nero.

This chapter has explored some of the more important implications of *De Clementia* for its wider contemporary audience. The treatise served multiple purposes for Seneca. The political make-up of Rome was shifting away from a Republic and towards an Empire. Seneca uses *De Clementia* as an opportunity to cement this transition in the minds of the Roman elite. Despite Nero's youth, he is still preeminent in Rome, approaching the status of a god. Rather than attempting to take advantage of an immature ruler, Seneca wants the people to provide full support of Nero as the undisputed head-of-state. In order to win this support, Seneca provides the implied audience with reason to believe that Nero is and will be a virtuous ruler. In an attempt to counteract the harmful rumors spreading of Nero's violent behavior, Seneca presents an image of Nero as eager to attain virtue and act gently towards his citizens. In the treatise Nero seems even pleasantly naïve, unwilling to exact just punishment on criminals. Seneca was fully aware of his audience, and he constructed *De Clementia* with them in mind, both to instruct them in their role in the state and to reassure them of the competence and goodness of their ruler.

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