

RESEARCH

Nero's Cautious Consigliere: Examining How Seneca Imbues His Literary Devices With a Soft Tone in *De Clementia*

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Seneca the Younger's manner of writing typifies the concise style commonly associated with the "Silver Age" of Latin literature. As Summers observes in relation to Seneca's letters, the "general tendency towards brevity of expression" that he shares with his first-century BCE predecessor Sallust makes his arguments as clear and as easily understood as possible for his reader.¹ While Seneca seems to maintain this proclivity for succinctness across his many genres of writing, different scenarios still require him to adopt different tones when addressing his intended audiences. As such, he must imbue a given structure or poetic device with one tenor or another depending on the goal of the work. Perhaps nowhere is it more imperative for him to fine-tune elements of his concise style in this way than in his treatise on clemency written for Emperor Nero. In *De Clementia* 1.5-6, 5.4, and 9.6, Seneca's choice of an example to serve as a model for his reader, the manner in which he employs his addressee as an interlocutor, and his selection of imagery and decision to make use of interlocutors within a comparison help him adopt

¹ Walter C. Summers, *Select Letters of Seneca*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960: xci.

the soft tone necessary to keep himself in the emperor's good graces even as he offers him advice on the importance of clemency.

In order to best understand the nuances of Seneca's choice of example in *De Clementia* 1.5-6, it can be quite useful to first consider the way he employs an example in his writing when not addressing Nero. The following passage from *De Providentia* 2.11 makes for a fruitful comparison:

2.11 Liqueat mihi cum magno spectasse gaudio deos, dum ille uir, acerrimus sui uindex, alienae saluti consulit et instruit discedentium fugam, dum studia etiam nocte ultima tractat, dum gladium sacro pectori infigit, dum uiscera spargit et illam sanctissimam animam indignamque quae ferro contaminaretur manu educit.²

Seneca, *De Providentia* 2.11

It is clear to me that the gods watched with great delight while that man, the fiercest avenger of himself, considered the safety of others and prepared the escape of those departing, while he drew along his studies even on that final night, while he thrust his sword into his sacred breast, while he scattered his entrails and led out with his hand that most pure spirit, which was not deserving of being contaminated by iron.³

Within this section of *De Providentia*, as Mayer points out, Seneca seeks to present Cato as the greatest example of a

² All Latin texts accessed at <www.thelatinlibrary.com>.

³ All translations are my own.

good man overcoming misfortune.⁴ In the lines above, he uses anaphora to both organize and emphasize the reasons why Cato is so worthy a model (dum...dum...dum...dum, *De Providentia* 2.11). At once considering “the safety of others” and continuing “his studies even on that final night,” he retains the resolve to complete his suicide attempt “with his hand” when the sword fails him (aliena saluti consulit; dum studia etiam nocte ultima tractet; manu, *De Providentia* 2.11). As might be expected for an author describing a model to be emulated, we see here that Seneca provides Lucilius with the example of a *different* person accomplishing a great act (a significant historical figure in this case) to help his reader understand how good men are supposed to overcome hardship.

This is not exactly what we see in *De Clementia* 1.5-6. In the following lines, Seneca explains to Nero what type of model he should emulate as a ruler:

1.5 Refertur tibi gratia; nemo unus homo uni homini tam carus umquam fuit, quam tu populo Romano, magnum longumque eius bonum. 6 Sed ingens tibi onus imposuisti; nemo iam divum Augustum nec Ti. Caesaris prima tempora loquitur nec, quod te imitari velit, exemplar extra te quaerit; principatus tuus ad gustum exigitur. Difficile hoc fuisset, si non naturalis tibi ista bonitas esset, sed ad tempus sumpta. Nemo enim potest personam diu ferre, ficta cito in naturam suam recidunt; quibus veritas subest quaeque, ut ita dicam, ex solido enascuntur, tempore ipso in maius meliusque procedunt.

⁴ Roland G. Mayer, “Roman Historical Exempla in Seneca,” *Seneca*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008: 304-5.

Gratitude is brought back to you; no one man was ever as dear to one person, as you are to the Roman people, its great and long-lasting good. But you have placed upon yourself a huge burden; no one now talks about divine Augustus or the first times of Tiberius Caesar nor searches for an example which he would have you imitate outside of you; your rule as emperor is made to conform to the first taste. This would have been difficult, if that goodness of yours were not natural, but assumed for the occasion. For no one is able to bear a mask for a long time, fiction quickly falls back into its own nature; those things beneath which truth, so to speak, sprouts up from solid ground, advance into the greater and the better with time itself.

Structurally speaking, Seneca takes an approach similar to the one he takes in *De Providentia* 2.11 in the lines above. Here, too, he employs anaphora to both organize and emphasize his description of a model for his reader to emulate (*nemo...nemo...nemo*, *De Clementia* 1.5-6). The major difference between these passages is that in the latter, the model offered to the reader is that of the reader himself. *Prima facie*, this would suggest that the author's goal is to flatter his addressee rather than to instruct him (i.e. by providing a real model—like Cato in the previous passage). Indeed, as Braund observes, the first and second *nemo* clauses succeed in appealing to “Nero’s vanity” by “stress[ing] the outstanding nature of the relationship between Nero and the *populus Romanus*” and by “suggesting that [he] has already

relegated Augustus to obscurity.”⁵

While Braund’s point about the first two *nemo* clauses is well-taken, the third *nemo* clause seems to serve a somewhat different purpose within the passage. Instead of continuing entirely in the vein of the flattery of the preceding two, here Seneca seems to offer his reader a lesson on wearing a “mask” (*personam*, *De Clementia*, 1.5-6). Since “no one is able to wear a mask for a long time,” he tells Nero, it “*would have been difficult*” for him to use his early reign as a model *if it had been the case* that the goodness he had displayed “were not natural, but assumed” (*nemo enim potest personam diu ferre; si non naturalis tibi ista bonitas esset, sed ad tempus sumpta*, *De Clementia* 1.5-6). Given the fact that Seneca chooses to take the time and space to include this short reflection on the difficulty of wearing a mask directly after his discussion of what a great model Nero has been for himself, it seems likely, as Leach notes, that Seneca actually has doubts about Nero’s desire to be a clement ruler and, quite possibly, about the emperor’s character more generally.⁶ Ostensibly in the interest of preserving his relationship with the emperor, he does not say what he really thinks in a direct manner. Rather, Seneca stealthily manages to provide Nero with some constructive criticism (regarding “assuming” goodness as a facade) *within* the overly-laudatory description of Nero serving as his own best model by making the meaning within the “mask lesson” ambiguous (the reader can interpret Seneca’s words about Nero’s “natural” goodness as sincere, or as tongue-in-cheek) (*ad tempus sumpta; naturalis*, *De Clementia* 1.5-6). Thus, we might regard this third *nemo*

⁵ Susanna Braund, *Seneca, De Clementia*; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011: 173-4.

⁶ Eleanor Winsor Leach, “The Implied Reader and the Political Argument in Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* and *De Clementia*,” *Seneca*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008: 294.

clause as genuine counsel for Nero veiled by the tone of flattery adopted in the preceding two clauses within the anaphoric construction.

We find another example of Seneca adjusting a device characteristic of his succinct writing style in order to effect a soft, non-provocative tone toward the emperor in his use of an interlocutor in *De Clementia* 5.4. Before examining this passage, however, it is again worthwhile to first consider an instance in which Seneca uses the same tool for a different audience. The following excerpt from *Epistulae Morales* 2.3-4 serves as a good example of the way Seneca utilizes his addressee's voice when crafting an instructive letter to a friend:

2.3 Distringit librorum multitududo; itaque cum legere non possis quantum habueris, satis est habere quantum legas. 4 “Sed modo” inquis “hunc librum evoluere volo, modo illum.” Fastidentis stomachi est multa degustare; quae ubi varia sunt et diversa, inquinant non alunt. Probatos itaque Semper lege, et si quando ad alios deverti libuerit, ad priores redi.

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 2.3-4

A multitude of books pulls in different directions; thus when you are not able to read as much as you have obtained, it is enough to have as much as you can read. “But just now,” you say, “I wish to unroll this book, now that one.” To take a taste of many things is a symptom of a fussy stomach; when these things are diverse and varied, they pollute and do not nourish. Thus always read proven authors, and if anytime it pleases you to turn to others, fall

back on the previous ones.

In this passage, Seneca employs the voice of his reader (his friend Lucilius Iunior) to further his argument in favor of fully digesting a smaller number of books written by “proven authors” (probatos, *Epistulae Morales* 2.4). The most important thing to notice here for our purposes is that Lucilius is used as a “disagreeing” interlocutor. Indeed, after Seneca lays out his beliefs regarding the drawbacks of a “multitude of books,” he has Lucilius respond in a contrary fashion by saying that he enjoys perusing “now this book, now that one” (librorum multitudo; hunc librum...modo illum, *Epistulae Morales* 2.3-4). The immediate juxtaposition of Lucilius’ words with a maxim that states unequivocally that his present way of going about reading is very poor indeed functions to make Seneca’s disapproval of his addressee’s current behavior all the more clear (fastidientis stomachi est multa degustare, *Epistulae Morales* 2.4).

When we look at *De Clementia* 5.4, we see Seneca use his reader’s voice in a slightly different fashion:

5.4 Clementia, in quamcumque domum pervenerit, eam felicem tranquillamque praestabit, sed in regia, quo rarior, eo mirabilior. Quid enim est memorabilius quam eum, cuius irae nihil obstat, cuius graviori sententiae ipsi, qui pereunt, adsentiuntur, quem nemo interpellaturus est, immo, si vehementius excanduit, ne deprecaturus est quidem, ipsum sibi manum inicere et potestate sua in melius placidiusque uti hoc ipsum cogitantem: “Occidere contra legem nemo non potest, servare nemo praeter me?”

Seneca, *De Clementia* 5.4

Clemency, into whatever house it will have come the whole way, will make it happy and peaceful; but into kingdoms, in which it is rarer, it is on that account more extraordinary. What in fact is more worthy of remembering than that he, whose anger nothing obstructs, whose more serious opinions themselves are assented to by those who are ruined, whom no one is about to interrupt, indeed, if he became violently angry, not even about to beg for mercy, himself takes possession of himself and uses his own power in a better and more gentle manner thinking this very thing: “No man is not able to kill against the law, no man except me is able to save against the law”?

Just as he does with his friend’s voice in the *Epistulae Morales* 2.3-4 passage, here Seneca uses the voice of an emperor (or Nero) as a tool to help make his argument as well-structured and as easy to follow as possible. Indeed, the words of the emperor at the end of this excerpt concisely explain the type of kingly mindset necessary to be able to do what is described as “more worthy of remembering” than anything else (i.e. display clemency when it is possible to get away with the greatest cruelty) (memorabilis, *De Clementia* 5.4) Still, there remains a significant difference between these two cases. Whereas the voice used in *Epistulae Morales* 2.3-4 is an example of a “disagreeing” interlocutor, the voice used in *De Clementia* 5.4 is an example of an “agreeing” one. Instead of using his interlocutor’s voice to anticipate and subsequently answer the reader’s arguments to the contrary, as he does with Lucilius’s voice (and, of course, as he does with the “third-party voice” of what “someone might say”

across many of his works, such as in *Ad Helviam* 2.2), when writing in the voice of the emperor for Nero, Seneca makes the interlocutor both assent to the argument already outlined and provide an additional reason why emperors ought to be merciful (because it flaunts their unique power to “save someone against the law”) (servare nemo praeter me, *De Clementia* 5.4). This “positive” usage of the Emperor’s voice in *De Clementia* 5.4 allows Seneca’s writing to enjoy the benefits of using an interlocutor while still refraining from directly disagreeing with “literary Nero” about the subject at hand.

Perhaps the most revealing example of Seneca fine-tuning a poetic device to adopt a soft tone toward his reader in the whole work is the comparison he employs in *De Clementia* 9.6. Prior to looking at those lines, however, let us again first consider an instance in which he utilizes the same tool for a different audience. In the following passage taken from the introductory portion, or “exordium,” of *Ad Helviam*, Seneca uses violent and aggressive imagery to list and strengthen his mother’s reasons for grieving (before providing arguments as to why she should still find solace):

3.1 Gravissimum est ex omnibus quae umquam
in corpus tuum descenderunt recens vulnus,
fateor; non summam cutem rupit, pectus et
viscera ipsa divisit. Sed quemadmodum tirones
leviter saucii tamen vociferantur et manus
medicorum magis quam ferrum horrent, at
veteran quamvis confossi patienter ac sine
gemitu velut aliena corpora exsaniari patiuntur,
ita tu nunc debes fortiter praebere te curationi. 2
Lamentationes quidem et eiulatus et alia per
quae fere muliebris dolor tumultuatur amove.

Seneca, *Ad Helviam* 3.1-2

I admit, the recent wound is the most serious of all those which have ever descended into your body; it did not just break the highest skin, it divided the breast and the internal organs themselves. But just as slightly wounded newly recruited soldiers nevertheless cry out and fear the hands of doctors more than the sword, whereas veterans although stabbed bravely and without a groan tolerate that their bodies be drained as though they were someone else's, so too now you ought to offer yourself up to therapy bravely. At the very least keep away lamentations and wailing and other things through which the grief of women generally makes a disturbance.

Here we see Seneca employ a comparison with gory imagery to urge Helvia to offer herself up for treatment. After comparing the hardships that she has had to bear up till this point to wounds which “have descended into [her] body,” he goes on to claim that his exile (the “recens vulnus”) has plunged even deeper into her innards (in corpus tuum descenderunt recens vulnus; *Ad Helviam* 3.1). From there, the images become even more gruesome. In the simile that follows, Seneca counsels Helvia to take up the courage shown by veteran soldiers who “allow their bodies to be drained” without “a groan” (sine gemitu...corpora exsaniari patiuntur, *Ad Helviam* 3.1). In doing so, as we can see, he is speaking to her in a very direct fashion about how he thinks “[she] ought” to act (debes, *Ad Helviam* 3.1).

When we look at the comparison Seneca uses in *De Clementia* 9.6, we find that he employs a very different strategy to give advice to the Emperor. Instead of using his

own voice to assert that Nero should behave in this or that way in a harsh, forceful manner, he writes in the voices of others (historical figures) to impart lessons on clemency to his powerful pupil. The speaker in the comparison contained in the passage below is Augustus' wife, Livia:

9.6 Interpellavit tandem illum Livia uxor et: "Admittis" inquit "muliebre consilium? Fac quod medoci solent, qui, ubi usitata remedia non procedunt, temptant contraria. Severitate nihil adhuc profecisti; Salvidienum Lepidus secutus est, Lepidum Murena, Murenam Caepio, Caepionem Egnatius, ut alios taceam, quos tantum ausos pudet. Nunc tempta, quomodo tibi cedat clementia; ignosce L. Cinnae. Deprensus est; iam nocere tibi non potest, prodesse famae tuae potest."

Seneca, *De Clementia* 9.6

His wife Livia has finally interrupted that man: "Do you allow," she says, "the advice of women? Do, that which doctors are accustomed to doing, who, when conventional remedies do not succeed, test out opposing ones. You have made progress not at all up till now with strictness. Lepidus followed Salvidienus, Murena followed Lepidus, Caepio followed Murena, and Egnatius followed Caepio, so that I am silent on others, for whom there is shame at having dared so great a deed. Now test out how mercy may go for you; forgive Lucius Cinna. He has been discovered; now he is not able to harm you, but he is able to be beneficial to your reputation.

Before even examining the word choice or imagery contained in this passage, the reader is able to sense that Seneca adopts a much softer, weaker tone in addressing Nero than he did in addressing Helvia simply by noting that the advice given here is relayed to Nero not through an example but via an “example within an example.” Indeed, Seneca has Livia employ an example to advocate in favor of showing mercy to Cinna within a discussion on Augustus (which, as a whole, is already functioning as a historical example on the importance of clemency). This method of imparting a lesson to Nero (as opposed to the more direct means used to instruct Helvia) seems to have the effect of distancing Seneca from the advice being given.

A closer inspection of this passage offers further support for the conclusion that Seneca is attempting to instruct the Emperor without sounding too authoritative. In addition to employing another voice to advise Nero, Seneca also makes the individual giving the advice a *woman* and has her ask *permission* to give it to a *different* emperor (“Admittis” inquit “muliebre consilium?”, *De Clementia* 9.6). Not only do these subtleties serve to distance Seneca from the advice being supplied to an even greater extent, but they also function to make the tone of the advisor—both Livia and Seneca—seem softer and weaker than that of the forceful advisor in *Ad Helviam* 3.1-2. This difference in tone is reflected in the verbs used in the imperative form within each passage. Whereas Seneca bluntly orders Helvia to “keep away” female expressions of grief, he has Livia encourage Augustus (and thus Nero) to simply “test out” clemency (amove, *Ad Helviam* 3.2; tempta, *De Clementia* 9.6). The implication in the *De Clementia* 9.6 case is that it will be up to the advisee to determine for himself at a later date whether or not the proposed display of clemency has worked out well;

in the *Ad Helviam* 3.1-2 case, by contrast, the advisee is told plainly to deal with her grief in the one “correct” fashion.

Moreover, the image of doctors “test[ing] out opposing remedies” used in the *De Clementia* 9.6 comparison makes the advisee—both Augustus and Nero—appear to be a more significant individual than Seneca’s military imagery makes Helvia appear to be (medoci...temptant contraria, *De Clementia* 9.6). Indeed, whereas he equates Helvia to a patient (a weakened person in a position of powerlessness under another’s care) failing to deal with grief in a proper manner, he has Livia equate Augustus—and therefore Nero—to a doctor: a learned individual in a position of power over others employing different methods to solve a problem (quemadmodum tirones leviter saucii tamen vociferantur... ita tu nunc debes fortiter praebere te curationi, *Ad Helviam* 3.1). Here again, we see that Seneca appears to treat his advisee in *De Clementia* 9.6 with a greater level of respect.

In *De Clementia* 1.5-6, 5.4, and 9.6, Seneca uses an example, an interlocutor, and a comparison to help convey the points he wants to make about clemency in the clearest possible fashion for his intended audience. By comparing and contrasting his approach in using these same literary tools in works where his addressee is someone other than the most powerful individual in the Western Hemisphere (*De Providentia*, *Epitulae Morales*, and *Ad Helviam*), we are able to appreciate the ways that Seneca fine-tunes elements of his style in *De Clementia* in order to adopt the soft, non-confrontational tone necessary to remain in the emperor’s good graces while providing him with instruction on clemency. For further research, as this paper focuses on the different usages of the aforementioned literary devices in *De Clementia* and on only three other passages in Seneca’s vast corpus, it might be worthwhile to identify and analyze additional cases where Seneca employs these tools. This

would provide us with more extensive data on all the various ways Seneca utilizes such structures in his writing and might thus serve to enrich our understanding of the three *De Clementia* passages discussed here even further.

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