

**Brian WARREN**

**Advising the Emperor and the Gift of Senecan *Clementia***

In his role as philosophic adviser to Nero, Seneca the Younger dedicated the *De Clementia* to the young emperor in an attempt to persuade him that a political program based on fairness and moderation was the surest guarantee of a successful reign. Much of the power of Seneca's argument comes from the way in which it draws on a dynamic of exchange in Roman culture which conforms to Marcel Mauss's concept of "the gift" (Mauss 1990 [1950]). The obligations to give, receive, and reciprocate, which Mauss identifies as key features of gift culture (op. cit., 39-43), are central to Seneca's analysis and presentation of *clementia*; the functions Seneca ascribes to *clementia*—to displace violent conflict, to establish, define, and maintain social bonds and social hierarchy—are also functions Mauss observes in gifts (op. cit., 6, 13). Through the concept of *clementia*, Seneca hoped to integrate Nero into his cherished vision of a state ruled by a restrained sovereign in which he and his fellow senators could retain a measure of liberty and dignity.

Griffin (1976, 133-4) dates the *De Clementia* to late 55 or 56, at a time when the murder of Britannicus (early 55) was hinting at the horrors to come later in Nero's reign. Both Griffin (op. cit., 137-8) and Sullivan (1985, 133) note that an appeal to Nero's self-interest is an important strategy in the essay, but this appeal does little to veil the essay's plea on behalf of the senatorial order: a ruling program based on *clementia* was as much in the interest of Seneca himself and other aristocrats as it was in the interest of Nero. The rhetorical project of the *De Clementia*, then, is for Seneca to present what he and his fellow nobles wanted as what Nero also wanted. In this spirit, Griffin and Sullivan both point to Seneca's skillful deployment of praise and admonishment in the essays as a psychological attempt to manipulate Nero. For instance, Seneca plays on Nero's vanity by saying *clementia* brings a ruler glory (Clem. 1.17.3), and on his fear of assassination or deposition by saying *clementia* brings a ruler security (Clem. 1.3.3; 1.19.5-6).

This paper extends Griffin's and Sullivan's analysis of the rhetorical and psychological efforts to manipulate Nero by examining the way in which Seneca presents *clementia* in terms of an exchange of clemency on the part of the ruler for adulation and loyalty on the part of his subjects, with security for the ruler as an important by-product of that loyalty. Seneca's anecdote involving Augustus and the conspirator Cinna (Clem. 1.9), in which Augustus's clemency transforms Cinna from enemy into loyal supporter, both illustrates the effectiveness of *clementia* and, by its central formulation (*ivitam, inquit, tibi, Cinna, iterum do* (1.9.11)), calls attention to *clementia*'s character as a gift. Roller (2001, 185-7) brings out the similarity of the dynamic of exchange involved in the Cinna anecdote and the dynamics Mauss observed in gift cultures, and develops the historical connection between the gift of *clementia* and imperial authority. This dimension of *clementia* as a gift adds depth to the essay's engagement with Nero.

This paper also shows how the *De Clementia*, read in conjunction with the *De Ira* and the *De Beneficiis*, articulates a vision of humanity and of the relationship between adviser and ruler which informs Seneca's strategy in the *De Clementia*. In the *De Beneficiis*

(6.30.3), Seneca reflects on the problem of gift-exchange with kings and tyrants: what is it possible to give to a man who has everything? Seneca's answer is *ida consilium utile* (Ben. 6.33.1). The position of the adviser, however, is an awkward one, because a good adviser tells the truth, and sometimes the truth offends. The anecdote of Cambyses and Praexaspes (Ira 3.14.1-2), in which Cambyses takes offense at Praexaspes' advice and consequently murders Praexaspes' son, illustrates the danger of the adviser's position.

In so far as Seneca connects *clementia* with humanity (Clem. 1.3.2; Ira 2.5.3), tyrants are a special case of the inhuman individual. In the *De Beneficiis* (6.19.8), Seneca excludes tyrants from the field of reciprocal giving because through their cruelty they have breached the common bond of humanity. Thus, in Seneca's essays, as in Mauss's analysis of gift culture, the fields of humanity and reciprocal giving correspond (Mauss op. cit., 39-40). Beyond the appeal to Nero's self-interest Seneca's strategy gives *clementia* the force of a human obligation. In light of the fate of advisers in the essays (Ira 3.14.1-2, 3.15.1), Seneca's effort in the *De Clementia* has great poignancy, for the essay so much about gifts was itself a gift of advice, and it has the structure of all gifts in Mauss's analysis: it presents itself as an unselfish, disinterested act even while it minds its own interests.