

Publicity, Vulnerability, and the Absolute Ruler in Seneca's *De Clementia*

Seneca's *De Clementia*, composed around 56 CE and addressed to the emperor Nero, is an unusual combination of "the kingship treatise, the panegyric oration, and the philosophical treatise" that explores and defines the nature of absolute rule.¹ In this portrait of absolute power, the ruler occupies a precarious position, and he must rely on *clementia* for self-defense. He is also a public figure who is always visible to his subjects. I argue that lack of privacy, or the inability to avoid scrutiny, is central to the conception of absolute power in the work, and that the exposure of the ruler to the public eye threatens him and ultimately the community he rules.

Seneca contrasts the publicity the ruler faces with the anonymity of the private citizen when he observes that *nostros motus pauci sentiunt, prodire nobis ac recedere et mutare habitum sine sensu publico licet; tibi non magis quam soli latere contingit...prodire te putas? oreris* (few perceive our movements, we are allowed to go out and come back and change our clothes without public awareness; you can no more remain hidden than the sun...you think that you are going out? You are rising) (1.8.4).² Although the grandeur of the metaphor does suggest the extent of the emperor's power, it primarily emphasizes his visibility.³ The ruler is like the sun not because of his beauty, his brilliance, or his crucial role in sustaining human life, but because none of his movements or changes in appearance pass without comment. This treatment of the absolute ruler stands in contrast to the "theatrical paradigm" for the interaction between the ruler and his subordinates.⁴ According to the theatrical model, the ruler is the spectator, and his subjects the actors who must perform to please him. While the ruler and the ruled observe each other, it is the gaze of the ruler that restricts the freedom of action of the ruled. In the *De*

¹ Braund 2009, 16; 16-30 on the genre of the work. On imperial rule in Seneca's philosophy, see Roller 2001.

² Translations adapted from Braund 2009.

³ Braund 2009, 250-52 discusses the use of sun-imagery in Greek and Roman ruler-cult.

⁴ Bartsch 1994, especially 1-35.

Clementia, however, it is the ruler who is limited by the gaze of his subjects, while his subjects may retreat from view.

In Seneca's account, *clementia* protects the ruler who cannot escape the judgment of those he rules. If the ruler does not restrain himself in exercising his power or demanding punishments, he risks provoking the *odium* of his subjects (1.8.6). For the ruler who practices clemency, *non opus est instruere in altum edotas arces nec...multiplicibus se muris turribusque saepire: saluum regem clementia in aperto praestabit* (there is no need to build up towering citadels...or to surround himself with multiple walls and towers: clemency will make a king safe even in the open) (1.19.6). There is no question here that the absolute ruler requires exceptional defenses against danger; the only issue is how he will construct them.

Both of these elements of Seneca's depiction of the ruler (exposure and vulnerability) have ramifications for the stability of the community as a whole. When he claims that *clementia* is the only means to achieve security, Seneca argues that *errat enim si quis existimat tutum esse ibi regem ubi nihil a rege tutum sit; securitas securitate mutua paciscenda est* (if anyone thinks that the king is safe where nothing is safe from the king, he is in error; security must be purchased with mutual security) (1.19.5). If the security of the ruler and the security of his subjects are dependent on each other, then the vulnerability of the ruler also threatens the community. The *De Clementia* is in part intended to convince the emperor of the advantages of *clementia*, but by focusing on the vulnerability of the ruler and how he must secure the goodwill of his subjects, Seneca draws attention to the fragility of the new system of rule at Rome.

Works Cited

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