

## **Absolute Power and Unsustainable Tyranny: Seneca’s Depiction of Nero’s Power in *De Clementia***

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### **Abstract**

This article explores Roman political theory on the legitimacy and use of emperors’ absolute power. Circa 55 C.E., Seneca, a Stoic philosopher and senior advisor to the Roman Emperor Nero, authored the treatise *De Clementia*, in which he advised the young emperor to rule with clemency and moderation. Despite the rich body of scholarship that examines this treatise, there is an absence of academic analyses that situate *De Clementia* within the context of the governmental mechanics of Rome. In this article, I argue that Seneca’s treatise depicts Nero’s supreme authority as contingent upon his capacity to uphold his obligations as an emperor. Further, I contend that this interpretation provides a genuine account of the political relations between Nero’s regime and Rome’s political elite that have not been examined in detail by previous scholarship on *De Clementia*. Finally, I posit that this treatise reveals how those operating at the top of Rome’s political hierarchy understood the emperor’s possession of absolute power to be tenuous and therefore cultivated tactics to maintain the longevity of the reigning regime.

**Keywords:** Emperor Nero; Roman political history; Roman principate; Seneca; *De Clementia*

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## Introduction

The English language is full of idioms that express cultural perspectives on those who hold supreme political power. For example, there is an oft-quoted line from Shakespeare (ca. 1596–1597/2006) that reads, “uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” (*Henry IV*, Part 2, 3.1.31). Similarly, many may be familiar with Lord Acton’s phrase “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (1887/1956, p. 364). These sayings show an awareness that sovereign authority comes with a heavy burden and that many rulers succumb to the temptations afforded by absolute power. However, these well-known phrases are just as applicable to the political context of ancient Rome. When the Roman Republic fell (ca. 27 B.C.E.), Roman emperors began to wield supreme power within their territory, yet this authority came with a host of obligations, and, as a result, an emperor corrupted by his lofty position was prone to dethronement. To comprehend how absolute power was conceived of and practised in the context of the Roman empire, it is useful to examine a seminal work of Roman political theory.

*De Clementia* outlines Seneca’s vision for improving Rome’s autocratic system of government during the principate period (ca. 27 B.C.E.–284 C.E.; Gowing, 2005, p. 97). Specifically, this treatise depicts Seneca’s ideal emperor as a model for Nero to follow in an attempt to curb the abuses and mistreatment suffered by the Roman aristocracy under previous emperors, which contributed to the assassination of the Emperor Caligula in 41 C.E. (Roller, 2001, pp. 239, 246; Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957, *The Twelve Caesars*, Caligula, 56–58). Seneca was one of Nero’s most influential advisors at the time of *De Clementia*’s composition (55–56 C.E.), and the primary objective of this treatise was to ensure that Nero did not meet the same end as Caligula, both for the sake of the young emperor as well as for Seneca himself, who held a powerful position within the nascent imperial regime (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010, *De Clementia*, 1.9.1; Tacitus, ca. 115–120 C.E./1914, *The Annals*, 13.2, 13.11). Therefore, *De Clementia* was written by an author intimately familiar with the principate who intended to address some of the most pressing issues facing Nero’s regime. Accordingly, the advice contained within the treatise engages directly with the issues surrounding Nero’s reign, and thus provides valuable insight into the political realities of the time and place in which this text was written. In this article, I advance three interconnected arguments: first, I assert that Seneca’s political advice in *De Clementia* presents Nero’s possession of supreme power as contingent upon his ability to fulfill his obligations to the Roman elite; second, I argue that this reading provides a nuanced account of the power dynamics between Nero’s regime and Rome’s political elites not extensively examined by previous analyses of this treatise; and third, I contend that this treatise demonstrates that early imperial leadership was aware of its tenuous possession of absolute power and therefore developed strategies to maintain its precarious position at the apex of Rome’s political hierarchy.

In what follows, I provide an overview of the academic literature on *De Clementia* before turning to a brief history of clemency in Roman society, followed by a discussion of Seneca’s definition of *clementia*, in which I assert that practising *clementia* was simultaneously a means to express and secure absolute power. Next, I argue that Seneca portrays Nero’s possession of absolute power as contingent upon his ability to fulfill his obligations as emperor. Then, I lay out the obligations with which Seneca tasks Nero. In the succeeding section, I discuss the opposition which, according to Seneca, Nero would face in the form of plots and revolts led by Rome’s aristocracy and the emperor’s bodyguard, among others, if Nero failed to uphold his obligations. Finally, I set Seneca’s political advice alongside instances in Roman history in which emperors

who failed to uphold their obligations became the targets of plots and revolts in a manner that mirrors Seneca's presentation of the limits of the emperor's power.

## Literature Review

Before proceeding, it is important to situate this research within extant scholarship that has analyzed Seneca's advice in *De Clementia* and has used this treatise to inform current understandings of political realities during the Neronian principate. When writing on Seneca's advice in *De Clementia*, most scholars have commented that the text depicts Nero as possessing absolute power that places him firmly above the law and other checks on his authority, which reflects the extent to which the principate monopolized political power by the time of Nero's reign (see, for example, Atkins, 2018, p. 80; Braund, 2011, p. 32; Gowing, 2004, p. 68; Griffin, 1976, p. 148; Griffin, 2000, p. 70; Griffin, 2003, p. 170; Leach, 1989, p. 217; Kaster, 2010, pp. 142–43). Additionally, Braund (2011), Griffin (2000), and Leach (1989) argued that *De Clementia*'s depiction of Nero's power as absolute served as a warning to elite Romans who might consider plotting to overthrow the emperor. It has also been asserted by Braund (2011), Hammer (2014), Kaster (2010), and Roller (2001) that Seneca's political advice warns Nero of the dire consequences associated with abusing his absolute power. Further, Braund (2011) and Roller (2001) discussed the ways in which Seneca's treatise subtly guides Nero with the presentation of positive models, such as that of the king and good father, while also cautioning Nero with negative models, such as the cruel slave master and tyrant.

Scholars have argued that *De Clementia* actively engages with the political issues that faced Nero's regime. Researchers have asserted that *De Clementia* was meant to distinguish Nero's benevolent disposition from the cruelty of his predecessors, Caligula and Claudius, and to combat rumours that Nero had his stepbrother, Britannicus, murdered in 55 C.E. (Griffin, 2003; Kaster, 2010; Tuori, 2016). Furthermore, Atkins (2014) and Roller (2001) contended that *De Clementia* constituted an attempt by Seneca to avert the cruelty and humiliation suffered by Rome's political elites under previous emperors, not least by Seneca himself, who was exiled to Corsica by the Emperor Claudius after Seneca was nearly executed by the Emperor Caligula (Dio, ca. 211–233 C.E./1923, 59.19.8, 61.8.5). Finally, Gowing (2005) and Griffin (2000) argued that *De Clementia* outlines Seneca's desired policy for Nero's principate based on similarities that connect the contents of this treatise to Nero's early actions and speeches, which were advised or written by Seneca.

While the abovementioned scholarship on *De Clementia* is valuable, it is not primarily concerned with how *De Clementia* informs current understandings of the Neronian principate and the political realities of that time period. Additionally, some scholarly conclusions regarding Seneca's presentation of Nero's absolute power in *De Clementia*, such as the findings of Leach (1989), fail to note how this treatise cautions Nero that his power is contingent upon his ability to behave as a benevolent ruler and, instead, interpret this treatise as an exposition on Nero's absolute power. Leach's article (1989) has been a central piece of scholarship cited by classicists studying *De Clementia*. Although this paper makes several significant contributions, such as Leach's observation that the target audience of *De Clementia* extends beyond Nero himself, the limitations in Leach's article continue to obscure several aspects of this treatise.

From surveying existing literature, there is a clear gap in how scholars understand *De Clementia* as a lens through which to view the *realpolitik* of the early Neronian principate. This article contributes to scholarship on this topic by performing a comparative analysis of *De*

*Clementia* within the sociopolitical context of the imperial court in the first and second centuries C.E. Ultimately, this examination finds that *De Clementia* is not merely an idealized treatise of Stoic ethics but a cautious work of political realism that was intended to have practical applications.

### **The History of *Clementia***

In what follows, I provide a brief history of *clementia* in Roman society to provide sociohistorical context for Seneca's political advice in this treatise. The term *clementia* was first used in Roman society to refer to kindness between Roman citizens and later to denote mercy given to defeated foreign enemies (Diodorus, ca. 36–30 B.C.E./1962, 32.4.1; Polybius, ca. 145–118 B.C.E./2010, 5.10.1; Weinstock, 1971, p. 233). During the Roman civil war of 49–45 B.C.E., Julius Caesar's policy of showing mercy toward surrendered domestic opponents led to the term being used to refer to clemency given to fellow Roman citizens (Dowling, 2006, pp. 16–17; Weinstock, 1971, p. 239). Cicero further cemented the importance of *clementia* in Rome's domestic political sphere with his three orations, *Pro Marcello*, *Pro Deiotaro*, and *Pro Ligario*, in which he exalted the *clementia* that Caesar had shown towards Roman citizens (as cited in Weinstock, 1971, p. 238).

As increasingly powerful statesmen began to practise *clementia* during the Roman state's violent transition from a republic to an autocracy during the first century B.C.E., the stark hierarchical relations between the giver and recipient of mercy were introduced into Rome's domestic political sphere, since issuing such a reprieve required the power to punish and pardon at will without legal interference or checks on a statesman's decision-making ability. According to Dowling (2006), *clementia* was redefined by Julius Caesar after he began to associate this virtue with the gods (p. 17), which culminated in the senate's construction of the *Clementia Caesaris* temple ("Temple of Caesar's Clemency") in 45 B.C.E. (Appian, ca. 162 B.C.E./2019, *The Civil Wars*, 2.106.443). Thus, by virtue of his power to save another, the issuer of *clementia* became similar to a god for the recipient of mercy.

Furthermore, the *clementia* of emperors was symbolized by the military award *corona civica* ("civic crown") and the title *pater patriae* ("father of the fatherland"), which both evidence the hierarchy associated with the practice of *clementia* (Braund, 2011, p. 43; Weinstock, 1971, p. 203). The *corona civica* was a Roman military decoration awarded to soldiers who saved the life of one or more of their fellow soldiers during battle (Gellius, ca. 172 C.E./2006, *Attic Nights*, 5.6.13–14; Maxfield, 1981, p. 70; Pliny the Elder, 77 C.E./1938, *Natural History*, 16.12–13). Crucially, the soldiers who were saved had to regard the recipient of the *corona civica* as their father for the rest of their lives (Cicero, 54 B.C.E./1930, *For Plancus*, 30.72; Maxfield, 1981, p. 71; Polybius, ca. 145–118 B.C.E./2010, 6.39.6–7). Thus, a hierarchy between the military rescuer and rescued already existed. However, during the period of the principate, the *corona civica* was extended from conduct on the battlefield to include an emperor's mild treatment of citizens (Braund, 2009, p. 42).

The supreme power of the Roman principate was in part modelled on the power of the *paterfamilias* ("head of the household"), who exercised complete control over his entire family (Roller, 2001, p. 243). Thus, the emperor was considered to be, in some sense, the father of the Roman people and was frequently offered the title of *pater patriae* as a result. It follows that this title and the *corona civica* were closely associated in imperial military awards, since both honorifics contain the notion of the emperor as the father of his people (Braund, 2011, p. 44;

Weinstock, 1971, pp. 202–203). Weinstock (1971) argued that the *corona civica* and the title *pater patriae* “belonged together” since Caesar’s *corona civica* was awarded “for the saving not of a single citizen but all of them; and, accordingly, Caesar was to be ‘father’ of all” (p. 203). Similarly, when the Emperor Augustus accepted the title of *pater patriae* in the year 2 B.C.E., this designation was inscribed outside of his house directly next to the *corona civica* he had received in 27 B.C.E. “for saving the citizens” along with the *clipeus virtutis* (“shield of valour”), which was engraved with four of his imperial virtues—one of which was *clementia* (Augustus, 14 C.E./1969, *The Achievements of the Divine Augustus*, 34–35; Dio, ca. 211–233 C.E./1923, 53.16.4; Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957, *The Twelve Caesars*, Augustus, 58.1–2).

However, even as acts of *clementia* undertaken by powerful Roman statesmen came to represent a power imbalance between the giver and receiver of mercy, the practice of this imperial virtue was simultaneously understood as an important mechanism through which a ruler could secure his power. When Caesar issued his first act of *clementia* by sparing political opponents who had held the Italian town of Corfinium in 49 B.C.E., Caesar wrote that he had extended mercy to his adversaries to “fortify ourselves with clemency and liberality” (Cicero, ca. 68–44 B.C.E./1930 *Letters to Atticus*, 9.7c). Furthermore, emperors, such as Caligula and Claudius, often sought to consolidate their power at the outset of their reigns by promising to uphold a policy of *clementia* towards senators and other political elites (Dio, ca. 211–233 C.E./1923, 59.6; Griffin, 2000, p. 51; Josephus, ca. 93 C.E./1930, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.246). Thus, the issuance of *clementia* not only demonstrated supreme power but also served as a mechanism through which an emperor could strengthen his grip on supreme power by creating a sense of obligation among recipients of his mercy, which included both dissidents and appellants. Accordingly, Seneca’s encouragement of the emperor to practise *clementia* in *De Clementia* is described by Braund (2011) as an acknowledgement of “the superior status of the emperor as well as ... the advisability of his treating the Roman people—or, more precisely, the Roman elite—properly” (p. 32). Thus, with the fall of the republic and advent of the principate, *clementia* evolved from sparing citizens during a civil war to an important imperial virtue which, if practised appropriately, could increase an emperor’s legitimacy (Griffin, 2003, p. 166; Weinstock, 1971, p. 233).

### Seneca’s *Clementia*

According to Griffin (2003), Seneca’s understanding of *clementia* is “recognizably continuous” with that of Cicero and Caesar in conceptualizing the term as restrained punishment and leniency towards enemies and convicted criminals (p. 170). However, Seneca’s definition of *clementia* redefined the term as the practice of selecting the mildest punishment that can still be considered just (Griffin, 1976, pp. 169, 172). Thus, an emperor who practises *clementia* might opt for banishment over execution when adjudicating punishments. However, in Seneca’s view, practising *clementia* does not preclude a ruler from carrying out executions, “but only as often as the common good urges” (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010, *De Clementia*, 1.12.1). Additionally, Seneca described *clementia* as the opposite of cruelty, since *clementia* entails minimizing suffering for the common good whereas cruelty inflicts wanton violence for the benefit of none (1.4.1). However, as Kaster (2010) noted, Seneca’s definition of *clementia* does not entirely reflect the set of behaviours that Seneca’s *De Clementia* encourages Nero to adopt (p. 137). For instance, Seneca also instructed Nero to act nobly in affairs of state and in his personal life, as well as to avoid using his authority to punish those who have personally wronged him.

Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) further defined *clementia* as “the mind’s moderation when it has the power to take revenge” (*De Clementia*, 2.3.1). Thus, Seneca continued earlier traditions associated with *clementia* by presenting the practice of this imperial virtue as a display of one’s superior power (Braund, 2011, p. 32). From the outset of *De Clementia*, Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) stressed the extent of Nero’s power, as for example in the following passage, which is written from Nero’s perspective:

I hold each man’s lot and station in the palm of my hand; it is with my lips that Fortune declares what she wants each mortal to be granted ... no area anywhere flourishes save by my wish and inclination; the many thousands of swords that my peace keeps in check are unsheathed at my nod; which tribes are rightly destroyed root and branch, which are sent to live elsewhere, which are granted freedom, which have it snatched away, which kings are made slaves, which heads are wreathed in kingly glory, which cities fall, which rise—all this is subject to my judgment. (*De Clementia*, 1.1.2)

Seneca further emphasized Nero’s supreme authority when he likened the young emperor to the father of the Roman people and to a god (1.7.1, 1.14, 1.21.2, 1.26.5). Indeed, Seneca presented the emperor’s power in more absolute terms than any previous Roman writer (Gowing, 2005, pp. 68–69).

Nero’s depiction as a supreme ruler in *De Clementia* corresponds to the political reality of the principate in which the emperor’s power was, in many ways, absolute (Wallace-Hadrill, 1982, p. 35). By the time of Augustus’s death (14 C.E.), the emperor’s near-total control over Rome’s army, provinces, and finances rendered the notion of a diarchy between the emperor and the senate a mere fiction (Griffin, 2000, pp. 19, 59–60). Accordingly, Braund (2011) observed that “there can be no doubt that ... the emperor was the ultimate legal authority in the empire” who wielded the power of life and death over his subjects (p. 40; see also Tuori, 2016, p. 194).<sup>2</sup>

However, Seneca depicted Nero’s possession of absolute power as contingent on his ability to practise *clementia*. For instance, Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) asserted that *clementia* is “at one and the same time an adornment of supreme power and its surest security” (*De Clementia*, 1.11.4). Here, too, Seneca’s presentation of limitations to the emperor’s power is corroborated by current understandings of the principate. Per Wallace-Hadrill (1982), the principate’s political climate was defined by an imperial dependency on Roman elites consenting to be governed (p. 48). Accordingly, the emperor had to wield his power with the interests of political elites in mind, otherwise his regime could face serious opposition. Thus, in depicting Nero’s power as absolute while also framing his possession of power as conditional upon mild governance, Seneca recognized the political dynamic that lurked beneath the supreme power entrusted to the emperor. Thus, the precarious nature of the emperor’s supreme power is epitomized by the practice of *clementia*, which was simultaneously an expression of absolute power and a recourse for a ruler to secure his tenuous political position. Accordingly, studying Seneca’s advice in *De Clementia*

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of the emperor exercising the power to execute citizens, see Dio, ca. 211–233 C.E./1923, 63.11.1–2, 63.17; Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957, *The Twelve Caesars*, Caligula, 26–29; Claudius, 29.1–3; Nero, 37.1; Tacitus, ca. 115–120 C.E./1914, *The Annals*, 15.60.1. For examples of the emperor acting as the ultimate legal authority more generally, see Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957, *The Twelve Caesars*, Claudius, 25.3–4; Nero, 15.1; Tacitus, ca. 115–120 C.E./1914, *The Annals*, 11.1–3; 13.15.1, 13.51.1, 14.21.1, 14.50.1.

presents an opportunity for contemporary scholars to develop a more refined understanding of the nature of Roman emperors' absolute power during the period of the principate.

### **King, Tyrant, Father, and Master**

Seneca's presentation of Nero's power as absolute yet conditional becomes evident when analyzing the opposing paradigms of rulership presented in *De Clementia*. Throughout *De Clementia*, Seneca uses the opposing models of rulership of the king and the tyrant to guide Nero's behaviour. Crucially, Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) argued that a king is distinguished from a tyrant by "his behaviour, not his title," and by his practice of *clementia* or lack thereof (*De Clementia*, 1.12.1–3). While both kings and tyrants may resort to violence against their citizens, Seneca maintained that "tyrants indulge in violence as a matter of pleasure whereas kings do so only for some necessary reason" (1.11.4). Thus, the primary criterion Seneca used to differentiate between kings and tyrants is the manner in which these rulers exercise violence upon their subjects.

The distinction between a king and a tyrant is of the utmost importance since, according to Seneca, a king can expect his citizens to protect his life and sovereignty at all costs, whereas a tyrant will be subject to frequent revolts and plots by his subjects. Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) therefore encouraged Nero to imitate the model of a king in the following passage:

For [their king's] sake, people are utterly prepared to hurl themselves onto the swords of would-be assassins and to lay down their lives if his path to safety must be paved with their corpses: keeping watch at night they protect his sleep, surrounding him as a shield they guard his flanks, and when dangers come rushing on they put themselves in their path. (*De Clementia*, 1.3.3)

Conversely, Seneca warned Nero that "whole nations and peoples have undertaken to destroy their tyrannical rulers, both when they've suffered and when suffering has been threatened" (1.26.1). Despite the obvious hyperbole present in these quotations, Seneca's point is clear: the king and the tyrant possess absolute power, but only the king can expect to retain it.<sup>3</sup>

Seneca also juxtaposed the models of the good father and cruel slave master to guide Nero's behaviour and to emphasize the conditionality of the young emperor's supreme power. Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) provided the example of the cruel master Vedius Pollio, who punished slaves by feeding them alive to his moray eels; it was only through the indignation of the Emperor Augustus that Pollio was prohibited from carrying out this cruel punishment (*De Clementia*, 1.18.2). Thus, Seneca used this example of Augustus's behaviour to demonstrate to Nero that a good emperor ought to disdain cruelty to such an extent that he prohibits others from practising cruelty. Moreover, Seneca employed the cautionary tale of the cruel father Tricho, an aristocrat attacked and nearly murdered by a mob for flogging his son to death (1.15.1). Seneca used this example to suggest that a similar fate awaits an emperor who fails to realize that he has the same obligations to his citizenry as a benevolent *paterfamilias* has to his children.

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<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Seneca (ca. 56–64 C.E./2011) asserted in *De Beneficiis* that supreme power "is itself dependent on the consent and support of lesser men," which cannot be earned by a ruler who mistreats his people (5.4.3). In fact, Seneca stated that he would assassinate a tyrant pending the following conditions: "if there is no hope whatsoever for [a ruler's] sanity, then with the same stroke I will return the favour and confer a benefit on everyone. For such corrupt characters, death is a cure; if he is never going to come back to himself then it is best for him to make his exit" (7.20.3).

Seneca set these episodes against the example of the good father Lucius Tarius who, after learning that his own son plotted against his life, imposed upon his son the mild punishment of a comfortable exile in the city of Massilia. Augustus is again present in this example, in which he acts as a member of the council of advisors that oversaw the trial of Tarius's son. Augustus is reported by Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) to have “decreed neither the sack nor snakes nor a prison cell [for Tarius's son] but made plain that a father should be content with the mildest punishment” (*De Clementia*, 1.18.7).<sup>4</sup> Thus, by outlining the differing outcomes afforded to the cruel father (Tricho), the benevolent father (Tarius) and the merciful emperor (Augustus), Seneca advised Nero that his position as emperor hinges upon his willingness to imitate the model of the good father rather than the cruel father or master.

Indeed, the opposing models of the king, tyrant, good father, and cruel slave master were commonly used as literary devices by Rome's aristocracy to evaluate and guide the behaviour of emperors (Braund, 2011, pp. 314–315; Roller, 2001, p. 243). For instance, Pliny's *Panegyricus* frames the Emperor Trajan's benevolent behaviour as that of a diligent and mild father of his people, in contrast to the tyrannical regime of the previous emperor, Domitian. Throughout this oration, Pliny (100 C.E./1969) praises and encourages Trajan to continue his positive treatment of Rome's political elite (*Panegyricus*, 2.2–4, 26, 53.7). However, Pliny also portrayed Trajan's supreme power as contingent upon his continued behaviour as a benevolent ruler and father of the Roman people (68.1–2, 85.6–7). In accordance with such evidence, Roller (2001) argued that Roman literature framed the emperor within a positive or negative model of rulership “to take a position regarding whether his authority is legitimate or illegitimate, to be accepted or rejected” (p. 213). Thus, Seneca presented Nero's power as predicated on his ability to emulate the models of the king and the good father while simultaneously using these positive paradigms to remind Nero of his obligations to the citizenry and political elites.

Accordingly, it is clear that the primary message of *De Clementia* is indeed that Nero possesses absolute power, but also that this power can only be securely retained by Nero's ability to act as a just and benevolent ruler. Grasping this complexity is crucial for understanding both the treatise itself and what it reveals about the nature of Nero's relationship with Rome's aristocracy. In what follows, I will discuss the protocols Seneca instructs Nero to heed if the emperor is to achieve political longevity and what these obligations reveal about the nature of Nero's supreme power.

### Nero's Obligations to His Subjects

Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) posited that the emperor's obligations are “the same as that of good fathers” who resort to severe punishments only after all other forms of recourse at their disposal have been exhausted (*De Clementia*, 1.14.1–2; Kaster & Nussbaum, 2010). Thus, just as a good father has obligations to his children, so too does an emperor have obligations to his citizens. Employing the model of the good father and king, Seneca showed how Nero's possession of absolute power depends on his willingness to practise *clementia*. While Seneca argued that *clementia* should be extended to all Romans, regardless of their social standing, he added that it is

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<sup>4</sup> Roman law stipulated that those guilty of parricide were to be sewn into a sack along with a viper, cock, monkey, and dog then thrown into the river (Burger et al., 2012, p. 123). The *clementia* of Tarius and Augustus would have been perceived as especially benevolent by a Roman audience since parricide was widely viewed as “the ultimate taboo” (Seneca, ca. 44–46 C.E./2010, *De Clementia*, 1.23).



more honourable to show *clementia* to those with high social standing on account of the respect entitled by their noble rank (1.16.1, 1.18.1–2). By emphasizing the importance of showing *clementia* towards Rome’s political elite, Nero was reminded of the significant political capital possessed by this social class, which empowered them to challenge the supremacy of an emperor when they felt that his regime had failed to adequately prioritize their interests and well-being (Braund, 2011, p. 32; Hekster, 2023, p. 16). Thus, this treatise presents the practice of *clementia*, especially toward the aristocracy, as the emperor’s primary obligation.

Beyond practising *clementia*, Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) advised Nero that an emperor ought to act cautiously when punishing those who have wronged him, since “nothing is more glorious than a prince who has been offended with impunity” (*De Clementia*, 1.20.2–3). However, Seneca also appears to have considered how political executions and banishments are perceived by the public. There are numerous instances in Roman literature in which the emperor’s punishment of political opponents is perceived as unjust, regardless of whether the emperor’s actions are merited. For instance, the ancient historian Tacitus (ca. 115–120 C.E./1914) described Nero’s execution of Rubellius Plautus in 62 C.E. as a “crime,” despite the fact that, earlier in his own narrative, Tacitus identified Plautus as a threat to Nero’s reign (*The Annals*, 14.22, 14.57; see also 1.6.1, 13.47; 100–110 C.E./1914, *Historiae*, 1.6–7). Similarly, the ancient historian Dio Cassius (ca. 211–233 C.E./1923) explained this phenomenon in the voice of the empress Livia: “no one finds it easy to believe that a ruler who possesses so great authority and power can be the object of plotting on the part of an unarmed person in private station” so that “practically all who are put to death by action of the [emperor]” are perceived as having been punished unjustly (55.18.5, 55.19.3). Thus, Seneca’s advice to refrain from using the emperor’s authority to settle personal disputes was seemingly informed by the public backlash often caused by such punitive measures.

Further, Seneca instructed Nero that, as emperor, he is obliged to act in a morally upright manner in his personal life and to set a virtuous example for his subjects. Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) wrote that Nero is subject to a form of “noble slavery” in which he cannot always speak freely nor act as he pleases since his reputation could be easily tarnished due to the high public profile that attends the possession of absolute power (*De Clementia*, 1.8.1). This advice regarding Nero’s personal behaviour is particularly relevant to the politics of the principate since, according to Griffin (2000), the emperor “was actually expected to exercise a moral influence, particularly by his own example” (p. 45; see also Tacitus, ca. 115–120 C.E./1914, *The Annals*, 3.55.4; Velleius, 30 C.E./1924, 2.126.4). Further, Winterling (2009) argued that the personal life of the emperor was not separate from his political position; consequently, the personal actions of an emperor were often perceived to be political (p. 59). As a result, ancient Roman historians devoted page after page to relating emperors’ debaucheries and other forms of behaviour that offended Roman cultural sensitivities, even when said behaviour did not negatively impact the well-being of the Roman empire nor its citizens (see Dio, ca. 211–233 C.E./1923, 59.13–16, 62.28.2–3; Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957, *The Twelve Caesars*, Otho, 11–12; Tacitus, ca. 115–120 C.E./1914, *The Annals*, 15.37). It is for this reason that ample descriptions of Nero’s stage performances—a form of public exhibition that the Romans largely regarded with disdain—have been handed down to present-day historians (see Dio, ca. 211–233 C.E./1923, 63.1; Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957,

*The Twelve Caesars*, Nero, 20–21; Tacitus, ca. 115–120 C.E./1914, *The Annals*, 14.20).<sup>5</sup> Even at the time of *De Clementia*'s composition, Seneca was almost certainly aware of Nero's love of the arts and that this passion could lead the emperor to act in ways contrary to what was expected.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Seneca's *De Clementia* and the emperor's obligations outlined therein engage with the pressing issues that faced Nero's regime, such as the uproar provoked by the emperor's use of corporal punishment against political elites, especially when leveraged to avenge wrongs committed against the emperor, and expectations that Nero act nobly to set a moral example. As I will discuss in the following section, Seneca asserted the importance of *clementia*, benevolence, and noble behaviour not only to boost the popularity of Nero's regime, but also to ensure that Nero would uphold the obligations upon which the continuation of his regime depended.

### ***Clementia*: The Surest Security for Supreme Power**

Having now established some of the obligations that Seneca urged Nero to heed, I discuss both Seneca's presentation of the consequences that Nero might face if he fails to uphold these obligations, and why Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) asserted that it is necessary for the emperor to adopt *clementia* as his "surest security" for his "supreme power" (*De Clementia*, 1.8.6). It bears asking what sort of opposition Seneca believed an all-powerful emperor would face if he failed to uphold his obligations. Atkins (2014) asserted that, by instructing Nero to be mindful of his "noble slavery," Seneca attempted to align the principate with "natural law," since citizens driven by fear and a desire to avenge their executed loved ones would likely revolt against a cruel tyrant (p. 32). Indeed, Seneca cited natural law repeatedly as he instructs Nero to fulfill his obligations as emperor; however, Seneca employed this inoffensive advice in part to blunt the controversial nature of his discussion regarding the potential threats posed by Rome's political elite to Nero's regime. While Leach (1989) argued that *De Clementia* "defines no role for the senatorial reader other than as a recipient of Nero's clemency" (p. 226), the role of Rome's political classes can be understood throughout the treatise as potential conspirators in plots and revolts against emperors who exhibit the behaviour of tyrants. Furthermore, Seneca also positioned the emperor's bodyguard and, more generally, anyone with personal access to the emperor, as potential conspirators in plots against the emperor.<sup>7</sup>

Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) employed an example of Augustus's treatment of an aristocrat named Lucius Cinna, who organized a plot on the emperor's life, to demonstrate to Nero how *clementia* can ensure the safety of the emperor from aristocratic conspiracies (*De Clementia*, 1.9.3). When Augustus is determining how to punish Cinna, Livia states that the emperor's severity had not been effective since Augustus's execution of more than five previous conspirators had not dissuaded subsequent attempts on the emperor's life. Livia then advises Augustus to treat Cinna with *clementia* rather than to execute him (1.9.6). Augustus is persuaded by Livia's advice and

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<sup>5</sup> For typical Roman attitudes toward performers, see Nepos, ca. 99–24 B.C.E./1929, *On Great Generals*, preface 5; Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957, *The Twelve Caesars*, Augustus, 45; Tertullian, ca. 197–202 C.E./1931, *On Spectacles*, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) praised Nero's singing voice and lyre playing in section 4 of the *Apocolocyntosis*, which was written prior to *De Clementia* (1.1; Marshall, 2014, p. 39).

<sup>7</sup> Seneca primarily portrayed aristocrats and members of the emperor's bodyguard as the most likely conspirators against the emperor in *De Clementia*. However, Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) considered other individuals to be potential threats to the emperor's life as, for instance, when he remarks that "even a slave can kill a king" (*De Clementia*, 1.21.1).

decides to forgive the young man, and even grants Cinna a consulship. As a result of Augustus's application of *clementia* towards aristocratic conspirators, Seneca claims that "Augustus was never again the object of a conspiracy" (1.9.12). Seneca's message with this example of Augustus is clear, if hyperbolic: an emperor can only protect himself from assassination by practising *clementia*. Of course, an emperor's *clementia* could never entirely eliminate the possibility that plots might be formed against him. This fact is demonstrated by Agrippina's alleged poisoning of Claudius, which was reportedly undertaken to make her biological son, Nero, the emperor—rather than for reasons relating to Claudius's *clementia* or lack thereof (Tacitus, ca. 115–120 C.E./1914, *The Annals*, 12.66–67).

Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) further explained the inability of harsh punishment to deter assassination attempts against the emperor when he wrote that inflicting punishments upon others will cause a reflexive reaction that directs harm back at the emperor in the form of "private plots" and "public upheaval," since, according to Seneca, "as many sources of peril pursue [the emperor] as there are people he has imperiled" (*De Clementia*, 1.25.3). In this vein, Seneca suggested that carrying out executions could prompt an endangered citizen to make a desperate attempt on the emperor's life (1.12.5). To this guidance, Seneca added that an emperor's "cruelty swells his enemy's ranks by destroying them," since, for every person put to death by the emperor, there are friends and family members ready to take up the cause of their deceased loved one, especially under cruel or unjust circumstances (1.8.7). Therefore, as Roller (2001) put it, Seneca outlined the consequences of failing to uphold the obligations of the emperor in the form of "barely veiled warning[s]" (p. 242).

However, Leach (1989) interpreted Seneca's advice in *De Clementia* as a warning to Rome's political elite of the consequences that come with opposing the emperor. Leach argued that, by recounting the numerous failed attempts on Augustus's life in the above-mentioned example, Seneca emphasized "the difficulty and danger of assailing the king," rather than the endemic nature of assassination attempts on the emperor (p. 222). Leach also asserted that Seneca mentioned the presence of Nero's armed guards to warn his aristocratic readership that the emperor "would be very difficult for one, or even several men to assail" (p. 223). Similarly, Leach interpreted Seneca's claim that the subjects of a king are willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their ruler as affirming the impossibility of undertaking a successful plot against the emperor (p. 222).

Indeed, as several other scholars have noted, *De Clementia* issues warnings to the Roman elite that are beyond the scope of this article, and Seneca may indeed have cited these failed plots against Augustus to deter those who might consider plotting against the emperor (Braund, 2011, p. 215; Griffin, 2000, p. 77). However, any complete reading of this treatise must simultaneously acknowledge that Seneca's advice acts as a warning to Nero of the consequences of using his powers without restraint. The mention of these five conspirators, though ultimately unsuccessful, coupled with the claim that Augustus was only safe from the threat of assassination after he adopted the practice of *clementia*, reinforce Seneca's message to Nero that an emperor will always face plots against his life if he does not practise *clementia*. Furthermore, Leach's assessment of *De Clementia* comes up short in several other areas, two of which will be discussed presently.

Although Leach interpreted the presence of the emperor's guards as confirming the impossibility of assailing Nero, at no point did Seneca mention Nero's bodyguard to intimidate his elite readership.<sup>8</sup> Rather, Seneca invoked the emperor's bodyguard as a potential threat to Nero's

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<sup>8</sup> Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) mentioned Nero's bodyguard thrice in *De Clementia* (1.13.1, 1.13.5, and 1.26.1).

regime alongside Rome's aristocracy. For instance, Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) wrote that “tyrants’ own guards have risen up and treated them treacherously” (*De Clementia*, 1.26.11). Here, Seneca stressed to Nero the importance of the distinction between a king and a tyrant by obliquely referring to the assassination of Caligula, who was murdered by members of the Praetorian guard and members of Rome's aristocracy (Braund, 2011, p. 367).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Dio Cassius (ca. 211–233 C.E./1923) discussed the potential threat of the emperor's bodyguard in his account of Augustus dealing with Cinna's conspiracy. Here, Augustus exclaims that “whereas unprotectedness is terrifying, the very men who protect us are most terrifying” (55.15.6). In fact, Nero was forced to commit suicide, in part, due to the desertion of his bodyguard in 68 C.E. (Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957, *The Twelve Caesars*, Nero, 47.3).

Perhaps the biggest shortcoming in Leach's analysis of *De Clementia* is the scholar's omission of Seneca's distinction between a king and a tyrant. While, as Leach (1989) pointed out, Seneca did indeed claim that a king's subjects will defend their monarch at any cost, Leach failed to observe that this protection is only afforded to rulers who adopt the model of the king; rulers who exhibit the behaviour of a tyrant are subject to incessant resistance in the forms of conspiracies and civil unrest (p. 222). As previously stated, Leach's 1989 article is a fundamental piece of scholarship on *De Clementia*, and the aspects of this author's argument with which I take issue continue to be cited and accepted by scholars (see Wilson, 2014, p. 124). It is only by appreciating this differentiation between a king and a tyrant that contemporary historians can glimpse the role of Rome's political elites in *De Clementia*. Rather than depicting Rome's political class as passive participants in the governance of the empire, Seneca presented aristocrats as the potential assassins of an emperor who adopts a tyrannical mode of rulership. In so doing, Seneca demonstrated that high-ranking members of Nero's regime understood the precarious nature of the emperor's political position and devised safeguarding measures to protect Nero's political longevity.

### **Seneca's Advice Contextualized within Roman History**

Seneca's advice relating to the consequences of the emperor's cruel treatment of citizens is validated by numerous instances of regicide and attempted regicide in Roman history after an emperor ruled tyrannically. For instance, Caligula's assassination in 41 C.E., which Seneca lived through and was keenly aware of, is explained by all ancient sources as a consequence of Caligula's cruel treatment of citizens, especially those of high social status (Dio, ca. 211–233 C.E./1923, 59.30; Josephus, ca. 93 C.E./1930, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.1.14–15; Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957, *The Twelve Caesars*, Caligula, 56–58).<sup>10</sup> Two primary conspirators against Caligula were Lucius Annius Vinicianus, a senator of consular rank, and Cassius Chaerea, one of four Praetorian guards involved in the plot to assassinate Caligula (Bingham, 2013, p. 37). Vinicianus is reported to have sought revenge for his friend Lepidus, a member of the political elite, whom Caligula executed. Further, Chaerea is said to have been driven to plot against Caligula after suffering various degrading insults from the emperor. Crucially, both conspirators are also reported to have been motivated to assassinate the emperor after Caligula's harsh treatment of others led them both to fear for their lives (Josephus, ca. 93 C.E./1930, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.3, 19.5). As discussed above, Seneca warned Nero that carrying out executions can cause others to

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<sup>9</sup> The Praetorian guard served as the emperor's bodyguard.

<sup>10</sup> Seneca's awareness of Caligula's cruelty and assassination is demonstrated by several discussions of Caligula in Seneca's writings: ca. 49–41 C.E./2010, *On Anger*, 1.20.9, 3.18.34; ca. 56–64 C.E./2011, *On Benefits*, 4.31.2.

fear that they will be the next victims of the emperor's violence and, consequently, to make desperate attempts on the emperor's life. Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) touched upon this potential source of danger to the emperor in the following passage:

Courage is sharpest when it's forged by the most dire necessity. Fear should leave some sense of security and offer a prospect much more of hope than of peril. Otherwise ... it is actually a relief to rush into danger and throw away one's life as though it were another's (*De Clementia*, 1.12.5).

Perhaps the fact that Chaerea and Vinicianus risked assailing the emperor testifies to their fear and desperation. Indeed, after the assassination of Caligula, Chaerea was executed for his role in the plot by Emperor Claudius, who succeeded Caligula (Josephus, ca. 93 C.E./1930, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.4.5).

Furthermore, the involvement of four Praetorian guards in the plot against Caligula indicates that the emperor's bodyguard was liable to plot against the emperor, just as Seneca warned. Bingham (2013) argued that all emperors require the support of the Praetorian guard, since their personal access to the emperor presented a potential threat to any regime (pp. 36, 42, 47). In fact, the Praetorian guard was involved in the assassination of nine emperors (p. 19). Thus, despite not being members of the traditional political elite, soldiers who served in the Praetorian guard were important political constituents in Roman imperial politics due to their ability to terminate regimes that ignored their interests.

Seneca's political advice is similarly applicable to the events that took place after his lifetime. For instance, the Emperor Domitian was assassinated in 96 C.E. in a plot led by his courtier Parthenius, who, as Suetonius claimed, was impelled to murder Domitian because of the emperor's unjust execution of Flavius Clemens, a consular-ranked senator and cousin to the emperor (Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957, *The Twelve Caesars*, Domitian, 1.14–1.17).<sup>11</sup> According to Dio Cassius (ca. 211–233 C.E./1923), the courtiers who undertook this conspiracy were galvanized to do so by the fear that they would soon be executed by the emperor (67.14–17).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the political elites who conspired against the Emperor Commodus are described by Dio Cassius and Herodian as having been discontented with the conduct of the emperor and driven to murder him after they suspected that they would soon face execution (73.22.1–3; ca. 250 C.E./1961, 1.17.1–2). Accordingly, it is clear why Seneca (ca. 44–46 C.E./2010) summarized the dangers of inflicting severe punishments when he advised Nero that “you spare yourself when you are seen to spare another” (*De Clementia*, 1.5.1).

The events of Nero's reign also validate Seneca's advice, as demonstrated by Tacitus's description of the motives of those who joined the Pisonian conspiracy against Nero in 65 C.E., which was comprised of various aristocratic and Praetorian collaborators. Tacitus (ca. 115–120 C.E./1914) claimed to quote the words of a Praetorian guard named Subrius Flavus, who, when asked by Nero why he joined the conspiracy, supplied the following answer: “There was not a man in the army truer to you, as long as you deserved to be loved. I began to hate you when you turned

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<sup>11</sup> It is also plausible that Flavius Clemens was in fact guilty of plotting against Domitian, though, as discussed earlier, executions by the emperor tended to be interpreted as unjust, regardless of the actual circumstances under which they took place.

<sup>12</sup> Dio Cassius's claim that Domitian's assassins were driven by fear appears credible given that Domitian is reported by Suetonius (ca. 117–138 C.E./1957) to have executed a courtier named Epaphroditus immediately prior to the emperor's assassination by other members of his court (*The Twelve Caesars*, Domitian, 14).

into the murderer of your mother and wife—a chariot-driver, an actor” (*The Annals*, 15.67.1–2). In the view of Flavus, Nero had failed to uphold his obligations, which delegitimized his authority as emperor. Similarly, Tacitus related that, when Nero asked the Praetorian guard Sulpicius Asper why he had joined the plot, Sulpicius responded that “it was the only service that could be rendered to your many infamies” (15.68.1). Here, the words of Asper and Flavus typify Seneca’s warning to Nero that an emperor who behaves as a tyrant is likely to face opposition in the form of conspiratorial plots. Thus, the Pisonian conspiracy contained individuals from both the Praetorian guard and Roman aristocracy who, among other reasons, plotted against Nero on account of his failure to set a moral example after he had his mother and wife murdered and performed on stage (14.8, 14.60–64, 16.4–5).

The assassinations (or forced suicides) of Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and Commodus represent, by conservative estimates, four out of five unnatural deaths among emperors between 27 B.C.E. and 192 C.E.—excepting the chaotic year of 69 A.D., which saw four different emperors reign.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the premature deaths of these emperors can be seen as a pattern in which those who failed to uphold their obligations faced opposition from political elites in the form of plots and revolts. Accordingly, it is clear why Seneca emphasized the importance of the emperor’s obligations. Having lived through Caligula’s cruel treatment of the aristocracy and subsequent assassination, Seneca did not want Nero to face the same end, especially now that he was one of the emperor’s most influential advisors.

Moreover, it is important to understand the political circumstances that encouraged and enabled Roman aristocrats to challenge Nero’s regime. Since the reign of Augustus (27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.), the Julio-Claudian family had frequently intermarried with other aristocratic families; thus, an ever-increasing number of high-born individuals had a potential claim to the throne based on their kinship ties to the imperial family (Griffin, 2000, p. 192).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the influence of Rome’s republican past (ca. 509 B.C.E.–27 B.C.E.), during which time political elites co-operated in the management of the state, made an overt monarchy intolerable to Rome’s aristocracy. As a result, eligibility to become the emperor was not strictly limited to those with kinship ties to the imperial family. Thus, members of aristocratic families who formerly enjoyed a social status equal to that of the Julio-Claudian family could entertain imperial ambitions despite not being related to the imperial family (Griffin, 2000, pp. 189–191). The principate’s ill-defined succession eligibility criteria encouraged numerous plots against the emperor, such as the abovementioned Pisonian Conspiracy, which aimed to replace Nero with Calpurnius Piso, a man of high birth with no relation to the imperial family (Griffin, 2000, p. 193).

Furthermore, the vast nature of the Roman empire led the emperor to assign members of the political elite to command large numbers of soldiers on the periphery of the empire (Noreña, 2011, p. 7). The result was the constant threat of aristocratic challengers in possession of “considerable real power,” which could be used to revolt against the emperor (Drinkwater, 2019, p. 66). Indeed, Gaius Julius Vindex and Servius Sulpicius Galba—two aristocratic provincial governors who commanded large armies—both revolted against Nero in 68 C.E. and, as a result, the emperor was forced to commit suicide (Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957, *The Twelve Caesars*, Nero, 42, 49). However, even prior to the composition of *De Clementia*, Seneca had

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<sup>13</sup> The fifth out of these five emperors reported to have experienced an unnatural death was Claudius, as discussed above.

<sup>14</sup> The Julio-Claudian family formed a ruling dynasty that consisted of Rome’s first five emperors: Augustus (31/27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.), Tiberius (14–37 C.E.), Caligula (37–41 C.E.), Claudius (41–54 C.E.), and Nero (54–68 C.E.).

witnessed several revolts undertaken by aristocratic commanders against previous emperors, such as the revolt of Gaetulicus against Caligula in 39 C.E. and the revolt of Scribonianus against Claudius in 42 C.E. (Dio, ca. 211–233 C.E./1923, 22.5; Suetonius, ca. 117–138 C.E./1957, *The Twelve Caesars*, Claudius, 9, 13.2).

In consideration of the political climate of Nero's reign, it is clear why Seneca chose to emphasize the imperial virtue of *clementia* and the notion of "noble slavery" that paradoxically attended absolute power within the context of the Roman principate. The emperor was forced to contend with aristocratic rivals both inside and outside of the imperial family—some of whom commanded sizeable armies—along with the threat of betrayal by the Praetorian guard. Furthermore, despite the abundance of potential rivals to the emperor, the execution of rivals was not only unpopular but often encouraged others to oppose the regime. Accordingly, it was imperative that an emperor avoid encouraging such opposition in the first place by upholding the obligations with which Seneca tasked Nero.

### Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Seneca's *De Clementia* advised Nero that, while the power that an emperor wields is absolute, his possession of power is not. By using the opposing models of the king and tyrant, as well as those of the father and master, Seneca illustrated to Nero that his mandate as emperor is tethered to his fulfillment of the obligations that come along with his possession of supreme power. Aside from practising *clementia*, Seneca instructed Nero in this treatise to act nobly, set a moral example, and avoid using his supreme authority to punish personal enemies. Furthermore, I have argued that Seneca's advice in *De Clementia* is highly engaged with the historical context that surrounded Nero's regime and the Roman principate. As instances of regicide and attempted regicide in Roman history demonstrate, aristocrats and Praetorian guards, among others, could be driven to conspire against emperors who failed to practise *clementia* and act in accordance with the cultural sensitivities of Roman elites. Further, the plots against Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and Commodus demonstrate that conspirators were often spurred by a desire to avenge loved ones who were victims of political executions, as well as by a fear for their own lives that resulted from the emperor's violent actions. Although executing political rivals was sometimes necessary for the political longevity of a regime, Seneca cautioned Nero that ordering the deaths of rivals is not always an effective mechanism to consolidate the emperor's authority, since violent recourse often created unintended consequences for emperors.

Thus, by highlighting Seneca's presentation of Nero's power as both absolute and precarious, my interpretation of *De Clementia* contributes to a more nuanced understanding of this treatise, which has often been misinterpreted as an unambiguous exposition on Nero's supreme power. Further, by demonstrating that *De Clementia* is highly engaged with the political realities that faced Nero's regime, this article can aid future scholarship on the politics of the Roman principate to make better use of valuable insights contained within this treatise. Although *De Clementia* is not the only ancient source that reveals the precarity of the emperor's position, since evidenced by the writings of Dio Cassius and Tacitus, this treatise is a unique historical document because it reveals how the early leadership of the principate, here Seneca, understood the conditional nature of its absolute power and developed tactics for maintaining a secure hold on this precarious position.

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