

Analyse the extent to which Seneca's own writings can be used to understand his relationship with Nero.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca was a prolific writer of the Neronian Age and was the owner of a lot of political power for a period of time¹. Seneca was an important and prominent figure within Nero's life. As he was employed by Agrippina to be Nero's tutor, from AD 49, and later swapping the role for one of adviser to Nero, Seneca was thusly in a good position to wield a substantial amount of influence and political power². However, despite him clearly in a position where he had a substantial relationship with the emperor, not much can be understood about his relationship to Nero from his own personal writings³. Not only did Seneca just not include many personal aspects within his work, he was also accused of hypocrisy, whilst the needed promotion of Nero as a good ruler would automatically shade any of the more negative feelings involved between the pair⁴.

As mentioned by Wilson, "every apparent biographical fact is slippery and often untrustworthy" which therefore makes the extent to which his relationship with Nero can be understood, one which cannot go very far⁵. This is because many contradictions can be found, both within his own works and in the works of others⁶. Furthermore, even if every biographical fact were accurate, not much would still remain from the more personal aspects of his life anyway. This is because although a great number of works by Seneca have survived the test of time, a great number also have not⁷. Over half of his works are no longer around, and within this includes the entirety of his private letters, political speeches and most of his poetry⁸. Meaning, that most of the works in which something personal is likely to reside, have now been lost, and therefore, a great deal of Seneca's relationships and biography remains a mystery, and the extent to which his relationship with Nero can be examined with accuracy is small.

As mentioned previously, another reason why it can be so hard to understand more personal aspects about Seneca, and as a result, his relationship with Nero, is because of the nature of his writings. Contradictions can be found within his various works- both with each other, and in contradiction with the information we do know about his life⁹. Therefore, Seneca is often accused of hypocrisy- not only by modern scholars, but by ancient writers also: an example being Dio Cassius, "his conduct was seen to be diametrically opposed to the teachings of his philosophy"¹⁰. Modern scholars can, and do, often disregard the accusation of hypocrisy against Seneca, but as argued by Wilson, and what seems more likely, it would be unwise to discount the allegations completely¹¹. This is because although it is true that people evolve and change, the contradictions within his works are not subtle. For example, Seneca considered himself one who pursued stoicism, a branch of philosophy, but his works and political standing often contradict his personal thought¹². Such as when Seneca urged Nero to focus on clemency within *De Clementia*, as leniency was not considered

¹ Bryan, 2013, p.142

² Bryan, 2013, p.142

³ Wilson, 2014, p.7

⁴ Wilson, 2014, p.6-7

⁵ Wilson, 2014, p.6

⁶ Bryan, 2013, p.142

⁷ Wilson, 2014, p.6

⁸ Wilson, 2014, p.6

⁹ Griffin, 1976, p.10

¹⁰ Dio. Roman History. 61.10.6

¹¹ Wilson, 2014, p.7

¹² Griffin, 1976, p.9

such a great thing within the Stoic circles as it contradicts their teachings of punishment¹³. This means that although it could be argued that this was just individuality within Stoicism presenting itself, it is more likely that the divide between personal and political meant that contradictions were inevitable¹⁴. Therefore, if this hypocrisy is to be taken seriously, it would make unearthing Seneca's true feelings and relationships with people incredibly hard as it would be difficult to understand which words to trust and which ones were just flattery or required as someone within his position of political power.

One of Seneca's works which could shed some light onto how their relationship as tutor and student had been, could be "On Anger". Within this, Seneca stresses the importance of self-knowledge, "whenever you would attempt anything, measure yourself and at the same time the undertaking"¹⁵. He also gives advice on how hot-tempered people should conduct themselves, "choose frank, good-natured, temperate people, who will not call forth your anger"¹⁶. Both aspects are areas in which Nero could have made use, and as a result, are likely lessons which Seneca imposed when tutoring the young Nero¹⁷. Furthermore, because Seneca advised surrounding oneself with people who didn't draw anger, rather than teach how to handle the anger itself, an insight into how and why certain people who surrounded them were both added and removed at will. Therefore, it likely gives a potential explanation for why later Seneca hid himself away when his retirement was rejected, rather than go another route, as the teaching projected the removal of the person rather than the managing of the anger¹⁸. It therefore, although not explicitly, gives an insight into how the teacher/student relationship of previous days may have been. This furthers the idea that although the relationship between them cannot be discerned in its entirety, or even clearly, aspects of it can still be revealed in various ways.

The Apocolocyntosis is a humorous work in which Seneca follows the trend of first-century works and raises the living emperor whilst simultaneously mocking a previous one- in this case Nero being the living, and Claudius being the dead¹⁹. Once again, despite the main theme of the work being one of praise and vilification, Seneca can be seen giving advice to Nero throughout- therefore implying that their relationship was one which continued to be about what knowledge Seneca could bestow upon Nero²⁰. Some scholars can be reluctant to attribute this work to Seneca due to how unlike most of his other works this is, but it is likely an accurate attribution due to the content and how it aligns with Seneca's job, unofficial as it was- elevate Nero and display him as a great emperor through literature²¹.

This work is more interesting when also considering that in public, Nero deified Claudius and relied on his claim as diui filius whilst in private joked about his manner of death- this text follows that pattern with many scholars agreeing that this text was limited to the imperial court²². However, Whitton disagrees, and argues that there was "a broader readership"²³. This seems likely, although it probably still wasn't too public, as it further follows the trend of Seneca openly praising Nero and

¹³ Wilson, 2014, p.124

¹⁴ Griffin, 1976, p.10- 11; Bryan, 2013, p.145

¹⁵ Seneca, On Anger, 3.7.2

¹⁶ Seneca, On Anger, 3.8

¹⁷ Wilson, 2014, p.106

¹⁸ Reynolds, *et al*, 2012

¹⁹ Whitton, 2013, p.151

²⁰ Whitton, 2013, p.153; Wilson, 2014, p.123

²¹ Whitton, 2013, p.151

²² Whitton, 2013, p.153

²³ Whitton, 2013, p.157

making it seem as though his reign would be one which would make a difference. This is emphasised with Augustus speaking out against Claudius, as Augustus' clemency when young had garnered him much popularity- therefore demonstrating Seneca's goals for Nero clearly²⁴. Furthermore, with the text ending with Claudius being enslaved, it reads as though it was almost a warning for Nero- with all the negatives that Claudius did laid out plainly so that Nero could avoid the same mistakes²⁵. This furthers the idea that their relationship was one of advice, whilst also demonstrating that Seneca did also not stray away from the common platitudes that one was expected to give their emperor- with the work, although focusing on Claudius, not lacking in praise for Nero: - "Lachesis who herself favored such a handsome fellow did her job with a generous hand, and bestows on Nero many years from her own supply"²⁶. The praise, in fact, is often mentioned as being over the top, and may actually be so²⁷. This could suggest something more negative to the relationship between Nero and Seneca, which would align with how their relationship ended (with Seneca killing himself over accusations of being involved in a conspiracy)²⁸. However, it could also have just been part of the tone that Seneca wanted to employ- raising Nero clearly above all else. Either way, the praise demonstrates another layer to their relationship, depending on interpretation, either one of dissent, or one which demonstrates the more professional aspect. The professional seems quite likely, as throughout much else, Seneca seems to keep his personal life quite far out of his works²⁹. In fact, when read in tandem with *De Clementia*, it reads as an entire manifesto of what Seneca had planned for Nero, and therefore is very useful when considering what their professional relationship was based on³⁰.

The *De Clementia*, or "On Clemency", is another work of Seneca's which can be dated, and is one of the more useful of his works when looking to dissect the relationship held between him and Nero. This is because this was a treatise which was addressed directly to Nero, detailing and reflecting upon Nero as a ruler in the best possible light, and including various teachings his position would require³¹. An emphasis is placed on showing leniency and not repeating the mistakes of previous aggressive rulers. It therefore helps the reader realise how the relationship between tutor and student may have appeared, and resultingly gives more depth to their relationship, especially in the way in which it was presented to the public³². When he states "I would rather offend you with the truth than please you with flattery", it is clearly more geared toward the public who would be reassured that Seneca would keep Nero in line with his teachings of clemency, but also further demonstrates that the relationship between them was still one of student and tutor, which evolved into stern advisor and master, and this was the image that they showed the public³³. However, it is also known that Burrus and Seneca did use flattery and leniency towards Nero to make Agrippina's overbearing position more unstable, so is again demonstrative that his word cannot be automatically taken at face-value³⁴. This is something which makes understanding their relationship from Seneca's works only more difficult.

²⁴ Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*, 10; Whitton, 2013, p.154

²⁵ Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*, 15

²⁶ Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*, 4

²⁷ Whitton, 2013, p.161

²⁸ Reynolds, *et al*, 2012

²⁹ Griffin, 1976, p.2

³⁰ Bryan, 2013, p.144; Whitton, 2013, p.153

³¹ Bryan, 2013, p.144

³² Wilson, 2014, p.124

³³ Wilson, 2014, p.124; Seneca, *De Clementia*, 1.2.4

³⁴ Griffin, 1976, p.78

However, it also is one of the works most heavily criticised for hypocrisy. This is because being written in late 55 or early 56 AD, when Seneca says “the gift of a state unstained by blood” he is doing so after the death of Britannicus- Nero’s stepbrother whom he murdered³⁵. This is because although at this point Nero’s deeds may not have been common knowledge, either way, Seneca would have been writing something dishonest which therefore is clear evidence of Seneca’s willingness to lie to sell an ideal³⁶. However, if it were common knowledge, as argued by Wilson, it therefore reads as Seneca trying to do damage control and promise that the future of the regime would not look like this³⁷. Either way, it means that although it implies that Seneca was responsible for protecting Nero’s reputation in the written world- another layer to their relationship which can be seen from his works- it also demonstrates that his word alone cannot be trusted, which limits the extent to which their relationship can be entirely understood.

Overall, it is clear that the relationship between Seneca and Nero cannot be revealed to any great extent from the works of Seneca alone. However, this does not mean, that nothing at all useful can be found within those works either. It is clear that their relationship, whilst seemingly good within the first five years, remained one which Nero placed trust in Seneca to give him solid advice³⁸. This being clear not only from Seneca’s natural progression from tutor to adviser, but also from how he consistently presented new guidance within various literature. For a while, likely up until the end of the five golden years, Seneca and Nero’s relationship can be understood from Seneca’s works as one which was the pinnacle of advisor and master, whilst also having the remnants of tutor and student³⁹. Above all, the ideology in which Seneca attempted to ingrain within Nero comes out the most, and it is this aspect of their relationship which shines most clearly. Seneca’s works are notoriously bereft of personal details, which makes the extent to which their relationship can be understood one which is limited, but limited does not mean non-existent and aspects of what they were to each other still shone through to varying degrees in each piece he created⁴⁰. Ultimately, even with all the sources, the relationship between Nero and Seneca is still shrouded in mystery, but to get the best chance of understanding, outside sources should definitely be used, even if a good deal of information can still be gleaned from Seneca’s works alone.

³⁵ Seneca, *De Clementia*, 1.11.3; Wilson, 2014, p.121

³⁶ Bryan, 2013, p.144

³⁷ Wilson, 2014, p.123

³⁸ Reynolds, *et al*, 2012

³⁹ Reynolds, *et al*, 2012

⁴⁰ Wilson, 2014, p.6

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