At the middle point of the younger Seneca’s public life stands *De Clementia*, the work which appears to intervene in the politics of the early empire more directly than any other. The act of writing is foregrounded in the first book’s first word, *scribere* (“to write”), and in the explanation which follows, setting out the writer’s role in relation to his addressee: *scribere de clementia, Nero Caesar, institui, ut quodam modo speculi uice fungerer et te tibi ostenderem peruenturum ad uoluptatem maximam omnium* (“I decided to write about clemency, Nero Caesar, so that I might serve in some way the function of a mirror and might show you to yourself on the way to the greatest of all pleasures,” *Clem*. 1.1.1).¹ Seneca’s role as mirror is mediated here by writing itself, with Nero being approached as reader (or listener) of a mirror-text. A playful embedding of the reader in the text, in *et te tibi ostenderem peruenturum*, is used to back up the promise of future pleasure, an invitation to read and reread and literally to find “yourself” mirrored in Seneca’s writing.²

*De Clementia* is equally self-conscious about exposing this relationship to a public audience. This is evident particularly at the beginning of book 2, where the metaphor for writing is transposed from mirror to echo:

> ut de clementia scriberem, Nero Caesar, una me uox tua maxime conpulit, quam ego non sine admiratione et, cum diceretur, audisse memini et deinde alii narrasse, uocem generosam, magni animi, magnae lenitatis, quae non composita nec alienis auribus data subito erupit et bonitatem tuam cum fortuna tua litigantem in medium adduxit.  

*(Sen. Clem. 2.1.1)*

My writing about clemency, Nero Caesar, was inspired by an utterance of yours, which I remember having heard with a certain amount of wonder when it was said and having subsequently told to others: a noble utterance, great-spirited, greatly moderate, which was not polished or given

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¹ Translations are mine. The text of *De Clementia* is that of Malaspina (2001).

² For a comparable wordplay on *te* as part of a prefatory *captatio*, cf. *ita fac, mi Lucili*: *uindica te tibi, et tempus...collige et serua* (“That’s the way, my Lucilius: reclaim yourself for yourself and your time...gather it up and preserve it,” *Ep*. 1.1).
for others’ ears, but burst out all of a sudden and brought into plain view
the struggle between your goodness and your high position.

This time around, Seneca constructs his act of writing as the public
extension of a process that had begun with Nero’s private vocalization
and was followed by Seneca’s relaying of it to outsiders (cf. aliiis, “to oth-
ers”; alienis auribus, “for others’ ears”). The content of the vox (“voice”),
which Seneca goes on to reveal, is itself interesting: when the praetorian
prefect Burrus was requesting that Nero “write” (scriberes) his decision
about the punishment of two bandits, Nero had exclaimed, “uellem litteras
nescirem” (“I wish I did not know how to read and write,” 2.1.1). In its
casting of Nero in the role of reluctant writer, taken together with an
earlier reference to the pen as quite literally an instrument of violence
(the equestrian Tricho had flogged his son to death and was stabbed
by the people with styluses [graphiis], 1.15.1), we may see De Clementia,
an emphatically written text, as mirroring, echoing, and meditating on
the power of writing in a number of different configurations.

Seneca’s repeated reference to the beginnings of his writing at the
beginning of book 1 and of book 2 itself creates an interesting effect:
whether book 2 should be taken as a residual draft of book 1, as some
have suggested, or as belonging to a clear development in a work that
probably extended to three books in length, the two moments convey
a sense of writing and rewriting, of writing as rehearsal or meditatio. In
their implicit associations with Narcissus (1.1.1) and Echo (2.1.1), no
two passages in a single Senecan text can illustrate better what Habinek
has referred to as Seneca’s use of “writing as a performance.”3 If De
Clementia has been taken as Seneca’s way of signaling to the Roman
elite that Nero is in the hands of a competent and pragmatic adviser,4 it
also reveals Seneca as innovative in developing the potential of writing
in relation to the persona of the princeps, as he anatomizes his political
body, in the present text, into uultus and vox.

This position for the writer may be unique in Seneca’s writings: De
Clementia was classified separately already in antiquity from the main
body of Senecan prose, and it has generally been read as an exception,
even as an aberration, in Seneca’s oeuvre.5 Clearly his profile in the work
is one reflection of a frequently changing historical identity, in which

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4 E.g., by Griffin (1976) 137–41.
5 E.g., by Momigliano (1969) 251.