

Graceful Giving: The Role of the Female in Seneca's *De Beneficiis*

This paper considers the role of women in *De Beneficiis*, the presence of the female in Seneca's theory of gift exchange. It asserts that female examples are essential for understanding the framework that Seneca presents for Roman men and that Senecan reciprocity – often assumed to be entirely masculine – instead reflects an ideal of gift exchange as feminine and thus natural, emotive, and private, marking an important tension between Roman social practice and theory. While prior work on *De Beneficiis* has focused on masculine and antagonistic elements of exchange, namely obligation and reputation, little attention has been paid to the impact of women. Scholars have viewed gift exchange as a project in deriving social reputation (Dixon, 1993; Fear, 2007) or functioning within male relationships (Griffin, 2003, 2013; Gregory 1982; Konstan 2014, 2018; Saller 1982). Importantly however, Seneca refers to women or uses feminine language, explicitly or implicitly, approximately 65 times in his work. Further analysis suggests that elements of Seneca's exchange divert from male reciprocity, and can instead be read as a graceful process involving “sweet (*dulce*),” “precious (*pretiosum*)” and “beautiful (*pulchrius*)” benefits (2.6;3.7). This feminine aspect of *beneficia* is composed of examples that elicit emotional, internal, and more natural, rather than legal elements of the exchange. One such example occurs in a description of dancing virgin graces, which are presented to depict the ideal exchange of “beautiful” (*pulcherrimus*) benefits (1.3). These *beneficia* are exchanged cheerfully (*hilari sunt*), are pure and uncorrupted (*incorrupta sunt et sincera*), and are without binding or restricting elements, (*adligati nec adstricti*), represented by the maidens' loose and flowing tunics (*solutis itaque tunicis utuntur*). It is in this emotion, uncorrupted private, and natural liberality, respectively, that the female emerges as pertinent to Seneca's theory.

This paper analyzes this and other female examples in *De Beneficiis*, revealing how they are woven into the fabric of Seneca's theory of gift exchange. It argues that the presence of the female complicates claims that classify Seneca's work as promoting an obligatory, reciprocal exchange designed for elite men: women are integral to the gift-giving ideal, and critical in illuminating the tension between an internalized ideology of gift exchange and public social practice. This examination injects nuance into the binaries of exchange, revealing the graceful elements of giving and receiving that arise in Seneca's Rome – and in our own time as well.

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