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Of Aristocrats and Courtesans: Seneca, De Beneficiis 1.14

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During one of his expositions on the etiquette for giving and receiving *beneficia*, Seneca quite strikingly uses the *modus operandi* of the *meretrix* as a positive analogy for how the aristocrat ought to distribute his favours:

Quemadmodum meretrix ita inter multos se dividet, ut nemo non aliquid signum familiaris animi ferat, qui beneficia sua amabilia esse vult, excogitat, quomodo et multi obligentur et tamen singuli habeant aliquid, quo se ceteris praeferant.

De Ben. 1.14.4

Just as a prostitute divides herself among many so that everyone bears some sign of intimacy, just so the man who wants his favours to be appreciated, should contrive that many are placed under obligation but each one gets something whereby he might think he is preferred to the rest.

In a recent article MIRIAM GRIFFIN referred to the *De Beneficiis* as providing a ‘*lex vitae*’ in its exposition of the correct exchange of *beneficia*, an activity that is viewed as ‘the chief bond of human society¹.’ Moreover, GRIFFIN argues that Seneca’s philosophical work sets out an ideal to aspire to and reinforces this aspect of elite Roman behaviour ‘at its most demanding level².’ Given the salutary and idealised vision of elite exchange that Seneca is here expounding, might not the reader be a little startled to run into what seems to be a jarringly incongruous analogy? Was

Seneca aiming at such an effect of shocking the reader by suggesting that Rome's *virii optimi* could learn a thing or two about exchanging *beneficia* from the city's *meretrices*, or was the equivalence between these two types of dealers in favours more mundane than it may at first appear?

In her article GRIFFIN argues that Seneca's *De Beneficiis* should not be understood in terms of patronage or *amicitia* as such, as the author views the exchange of *beneficia* as an activity that is to do with originating friendships rather than with mechanisms of exchange. She also argues that Seneca's work is in tune with an ideology of the Roman elite that viewed the conferral of *beneficia* as acts that were horizontal in terms of the social status of the participants and non-instrumental in any sense other than the innate virtue of such an activity.

GRIFFIN'S argument here differentiates between the nature of *beneficia* (as apparently understood by Seneca) and other mechanisms of exchange in Roman society such as patronage and *officia*. By opening up this space, GRIFFIN distances herself from what she sees as the more cynical views on elite exchange, as professed acts of voluntary benefaction that mystify their own interest, that have perhaps become an orthodoxy under the influence of anthropological studies of gift-exchanging societies and Marxist influenced treatises on ideology³.

In this manner, an interpretation of the distribution of *beneficia* as partaking in instrumental exchange is viewed as a misreading of the *De Beneficiis* and by extension the mindset of the Roman elite, which it represents. It is certainly true that the *De Beneficiis* seems to promote an ideal image of the elite as benefactors whose favours were dispensed without economic calculation and with no view to simple economic gain. Thus, Seneca notes at *De Ben.* 1.2.3 that, '*nemo beneficia in calendario scribit nec avarus exactor ad horam et diem appellat*', 'For nobody writes

down their *beneficia* in an account-book, nor does a greedy collector demand them at a set time on a given day'. As GRIFFIN also makes clear, the *De Beneficiis* overtly draws a very strong distinction between the roles of benefactor and creditor⁴. In this distinction Seneca appears to have been following the standard precepts of elite rhetoric on the ideal nature of exchange in general⁵. However, at the same time that Roman elite writers talk about the circulation of 'favours' in terms that appear to make firm distinctions between the economies of commodity and gift exchange, nevertheless the terminology that they use also has a habit of eliding these distinctions. Thus the elite language of reciprocation not uncommonly employs, as SALLER (15) says, 'the language of debt'.

Nor is it easy to get around this by drawing a distinction between the operation of *beneficia* and other modes of exchange, for as SALLER (17-21) also argues our surviving evidence on the use of the terms, *beneficium* and *officium* does not suggest a rigid distinction between the voluntarism of the one and the obligation of the other. We may accept that Seneca's own conception of *beneficia* in the *De Beneficiis* is grounded upon a notion of generous giving that is voluntary and that this activity is conceived of as a virtue that aims at nothing but its own completion, and moreover that this concept of elite euergetism was one embedded in ancient society. Nevertheless, one must remember that ideals and how a segment of society chooses to represent its actions are no sure indication of actual social practice. Seneca's own position, and its correspondence to the strategies of self-representation elsewhere amongst Rome's elite, does not prove the veracity of disinterested giving it merely points to an acknowledged self-belief in such selfless benefaction.

Given the terms of the elite language of benefaction and the ideological tensions between ideals and social practice, Seneca's use of the analogy of a *meretrix*

in the *De Beneficiis* is very interesting. We should not, of course, assume that analogy or metaphor is an expression of simple equivalence. Seneca uses these figures of speech to illustrate the points he is making and in doing so there are inevitably points of similarity and difference. He says as much at *De Beneficiis* 4.12.1 where the example of comparing a *beneficium* to a loan is qualified by the author wanting it be understood that when he says loan he doesn't mean a loan per se but rather something 'like a loan.' Nevertheless, the terms and language that Seneca uses must have some point of comparison or they would be useless as illustrative examples; it is in the nature of analogy and metaphor that there must be points of contact and similarity for them to work. Thus, when Seneca uses the example of a *meretrix* it does not mean that all aristocrats are prostitutes but it does mean that a point of similarity is perceived in this particular case.

In many ways we should perhaps not be surprised by the choice of the *meretrix* as an illustrative example, for the *meretrix* is typically conceived of as functioning within the same parameters of an embedded economy that Rome's elite also traditionally inhabit⁶. The *meretrix*, like her Greek counterpart the *hetaira*, is usually defined in terms of her opposition to another type of prostitute, the *scortum* (the Roman equivalent of the *porne*). The essential difference between these two types of dealers in sex is the sort of economy within which each worked. The *meretrix/hetaira* functions within the parameters of an embedded system of gift exchange, whereas the *scortum/porne* works within the disembedded boundaries of commodity exchange⁷.

In his study of the different words for prostitute in Latin, J.N. ADAMS notes on the difference between the terms of *scortum* and *meretrix* that the latter typically does not carry the same pejorative weight as the former and tends to be used of sexual

relationships that are more lasting and in which there is an element of emotional attachment⁸. More crudely put, the difference seems typically to be between short-term sexual gratification and a more lasting sexual relationship, where the former was marked with all the impersonality of commodity exchange and the latter held out the promise of the social intimacy of exchange within an imbedded economy⁹. The *scortum*, therefore, was a merchant of sex but the *meretrix* was an exchanger of intimacy. Given the professed attitude of distaste by Rome's elite towards mercantile activity it was inevitable that *meretrix* was the less stigmatised of the terms, for this activity functioned within validated ideological parameters.

The terms of Seneca's analogy also point to the affective nature of Roman elite exchange. Such exchange is grounded in personal relationships and its functioning is dependent essentially on the good faith of the participants, and not on the extra-personal dynamics of a market economy or legal redress. Roman *amicitia* as a philosophical ideal was based on 'common interests and selfless service'¹⁰. DIXON further remarks that the Roman elite functioned within an 'ideology of internal egalitarianism' and within this system exchanges between social equals and unequals tend to be run together within the same terminology of friendship¹¹. Romans did favours for friends, *amici*, and within the terms of such relationships there tends to be an attempt to adhere to elite ideals of friendship that resulted in a 'notional reticence about the essential reciprocity of all giving'¹².

Seneca's use of the *meretrix* as a positive *exemplum* for the elite exchange of *beneficia* points to his understanding of how a practice of affectionate flattery can serve to maximize the exchanges of intimacy. Thus, he talks of the desirability of making one's *beneficia*, *amabilia*. Though, it has been usual to translate *amabilia* with some such word as 'appreciated' in this context, such a translation acts to

remove the pointedly affective nature of Seneca's parallel. COOPER and PROCOPE'S translation comes much closer here by translating this phrase as, 'Anyone ... who wants to be loved for his kindnesses¹³'. *Beneficia amabilia* are favours that engender love and affection, they are the instruments of building social bonds of intimacy. The ideal of mutual affection within *amicitia* has a tendency to generally elide the language of *amor* and friendship in Latin. An elision that Fronto tries to unpack in a letter to Marcus Aurelius where he stresses the spontaneity and self-sufficiency of genuine *amor* as opposed to the calculation of the flame of friendship that is sustained by the transient logs of *officia*¹⁴. The elision of the language of love/affection and friendship within a context of exchange makes the *meretrix* a compelling point of analogy. Yet at the same time, if Seneca's treatment of the use of *beneficia* tends, as GRIFFIN argues, towards an ideal one, where the practice is seen as a civic and universal virtue rather than a means to a self-interested end, then the *meretrix* analogy is a little unsettling even if we choose to see the term not as a precise point of comparison but as a more vague means of illustration.

First of all, unlike the Greek term *hetaira*, which semantically denotes its integration into an economy of friendship, the Latin term *meretrix*, 'woman who earns, paid woman' is marked by its etymology as concerned with economic exchange¹⁵. There is no getting away from the instrumentality of the name, however this may have been hidden in social practice. The semantic shadow cast by the key term in Seneca's analogy cannot but help to colour to some extent the other side of the equation. The *meretrix*'s *signa familiaris animi* that facilitate the notion in the minds of her 'friends' that they are special are clearly instrumental and self-interested in nature despite the apparent ideological parameters within which they work. For the *meretrix* her favours are clearly not virtuous acts in themselves but a means to

maximize the return on her own form of *beneficia amabilia*. From this point of view what the *meretrix* may be seen to offer is a form of fake affection that is cynically exploitative; as Dipsas, the *lena* says to the *puella* at *Amores* 1.8.71, ‘*nec nocuit simulatus amor; sine credat amari*’, ‘A pretended love doesn’t cause any harm; let him believe he is loved’; the feigning of affection is a weapon in the *meretrix*’s armoury.

In this way the instrumentality of the *meretrix*’s use of her rhetoric of intimacy tends to place a question mark over the motivation of the *viri optimi* that Seneca encourages to emulate this behaviour. Despite a code that places emphasis on distributing *beneficia* gratuitously as a form of self-sufficient virtue, nevertheless there is a degree of slippage between the ideal and the practice. As Saller says, one has to distinguish ‘the ideals of the philosophers from the common values and expectations which affected everyday life’. This leads to the apparent paradox that ‘although friendship was ideally based on mutual affection with no thought for profit, a necessary part of friendship was a mutually beneficial exchange of goods and services¹⁶.’ In this context GRIFFIN also points to Pliny *Epistle* 5.1.13 where the author admits that he is ‘not *tam sapiens* (not enough of a philosophical Wise Man) to be indifferent to the recognition he has received for his generosity¹⁷’. Pliny’s attitude clearly demonstrates that whatever the philosophical ideal was that underpinned the elite system of benefaction at Rome, there was inevitably a gap between the way such generosity was socially represented and the way it was socially enacted¹⁸.

To continue our examination of the terms of the analogy, both *meretrix* and *vir bonus* are actively seeking a plurality of friendships that are initiated by the conferral of ‘favours’. The *meretrix*’s motivation here is a straightforward one, the more friends she has, the greater her return. As Ovid’s Dipsas says again, ‘*nec satis effectus unus et*

alter habent’, ‘Nor do one or two lovers give good enough results¹⁹’. The *meretrix*’s return, in keeping with the nature of gift-exchange, is imprecise and variable²⁰. Nevertheless, there can be little question that the favours she distributes to her plurality of friends are a form of investment; as Astaphium says in Plautus’s *Truculentus*, ‘*semper daturos novos oportet quaerere, / qui de thesauris integris demus dabunt*,’ ‘We always need to be on the lookout for new givers who will give from unscathed treasuries²¹.’

The *meretrix* is thus a farmer of friends who seeks to maximise her investment through a process of careful cultivation that is based on feigned intimacy. The notion of careful cultivation and the analogy to a good farmer is one that Seneca uses elsewhere in the *De Beneficiis*:

Quod in hoc perdidit, ab aliis recipiam. Sed huic ipsi beneficium dabo iterum et tamquam bonus agricola cura cultaque sterilitatem soli vincam.

7.32

What I have lost in the case of this man, I shall reclaim from others.
but I will give a *beneficium* to this man himself again and like a good farmer I shall conquer the barrenness of the soil with care and cultivation²².

Seneca is talking here principally about the need for discrimination in giving. Nevertheless, as in the case of the *meretrix*, the nature of his illustrative example serves to colour the nature of the generosity, which he is seeking to define. The analogy of the good farmer overcoming the sterility of the soil through careful

cultivation throws up questions over the expectations behind freely offered acts of generosity. Although, Seneca would have it in this passage that he himself has reaped the advantage of his generosity simply in proffering it, nevertheless the concern also expressed here over *ingratia* on the part of the recipient, and a determination to overcome it in the terms of the analogy to a good farmer, suggest that a return on generosity is expected and to be worked for.

Elsewhere, the nature of such a return is made clearer:

Ego vero beneficiis non obicio moras; quo plura maioraque fuerint, plus adferent laudis.

De Beneficiis 1.15.1

Indeed I don't place any hindrances in the way of *beneficia*, the more and greater they are, the more praise they bring in.

Here, Seneca makes quite explicit a correlation between the distribution of *beneficia* and return of *laus*. The positive social valuation of his peers in the form of esteem, *laus*, is the return on the investment that *beneficia* represent (as is also made clear in Pliny's letter examined earlier). Although, the return is different in kind from any form of financial or material profit, nevertheless it does suggest that there is perhaps a bit more to the giving out of *beneficia* than pure acts of disinterested *virtus*.

Elsewhere, Seneca directly confronts this apparent tension between the notion that conferring *beneficia* is a self-sufficient virtue and the suspicion, explored through the analogy of the farmer again, that it is an activity that aims at some return.

“Dicitis,” inquit, “diligenter eligendos, quibus beneficia demus, quia ne agricolae quidem semina harenis committant; quod si verum est, nostram utilitatem in beneficiis dandis sequimur, quemadmodum in arando serendoque; neque enim serere per se res expetenda est.”

De Beneficiis 4.9.2

“You state,” he says “that we ought to choose carefully those to whom we would give *beneficia*, because not even farmers entrust seeds to sand; but if this is true, we are pursuing our own advantage in giving out *beneficia*, just as is the case in ploughing and sowing; for sowing isn’t an activity that is sought for its own sake.”

Seneca’s answer is that honourable acts are indeed honourable in themselves but nevertheless discrimination must be made in distributing *beneficia*, as to bestow a favour on a base person would make it neither a *beneficium*, nor a honourable action. Yet this doesn’t get us away entirely from the notion of return. The aim of discrimination is to bestow *beneficia* on the worthy. This worth is measured, Seneca insists, not on whether a return will be given in a material sense but whether the recipient will be grateful. This gratitude in itself is the return and is sufficient. In these terms the skilled conveyor of *beneficia* is like a farmer in choosing the soil best suited for planting his favours in, and in having the requisite skill to elicit a crop from even unpromisingly sterile ground. Seneca’s answers though don’t remove a certain instrumentality from the conferral of *beneficia*, which ought to result in the gratitude of the recipient and the positive esteem (*laus*) of the wider community for the judicious exercise of generosity.

Seneca attempts, elsewhere, to answer these potential charges of self-interest by arguing that *utilitas* is an unintended and unimportant side-effect of *virtus*. The distribution of *beneficia* remains an activity that is valuable in itself, for it would remain gratifying even if its attendant advantages, *commoda*, were removed²³. As Pliny reveals, however, in *Epistle* 5.1, most Romans were not *virī sapientes* and so were not insensible to the potential *commoda* that *beneficia* could bring. The contradiction between the ideal of benefaction and the social reality of its practice was an everyday conundrum of elite Roman life. Seneca's *De Beneficiis* functions very much within the terms of this conundrum. The work in itself is an instrumental use of philosophical *virtus* in that its very exposition of *beneficia* serves to accrue symbolic capital for its author. At the same time the *De Beneficiis* also sets out criteria for Rome's elite to enhance their shared social capital by the acquisition of the symbolic/cultural capital of *laus* through the astute use of *beneficia*. It is hard to see philosophical *virtus* in this context as simply a disinterested practice. Rather, Seneca's work constructs a philosophical frame and justification for an elite practice that can be viewed like other forms of exchange as a self-interested intervention in Roman social life. In this manner, the *De Beneficiis* mirrors the disjunction between philosophical ideals and the pragmatics of life that was a habitual part of Roman elite life²⁴.

Seneca's use of the *meretrix* analogy marks a point where the ideals and practices of friendship and benefaction reside in uneasy tension. As we have seen, it is certainly not the only place (or the only form of analogy) in the *De Beneficiis* where this happens, but it is perhaps the most striking and vividly expressed instance of this conflict, as an elite Roman expresses his appreciation of the tricks of a *meretrix*, a fellow spirit in the exploitation of the relations of intimacy.

¹ GRIFFIN (2003) 92.

² GRIFFIN (2003) 113.

³ The following texts seem to have been particularly influential on the work of scholars on Roman patronage and exchange such as SALLER (1982) and DIXON (1993); PITT-RIVERS (1954); SAHLINS (1965); MAUSS (1967); POLANYI (1968); BOURDIEU (1977).

⁴ GRIFFIN (2003) 99 provides a list of passages from the *De Beneficiis* that support this distinction.

⁵ So SALLER (1982) 12-13 argues that little appears to have changed concerning the ideals of *amicitia* from Cicero's writings to Seneca's; GRIFFIN (2003) 53 points to a parallel rejection of trading in *beneficia* at Cic., *Amic.* 31: '*neque enim beneficium faeneramur,*' 'nor do we lend a *beneficium* out on interest'.

⁶ POLANYI (1968) is the seminal study on the topic of embedded and disembedded economies.

⁷ For more on this distinction between the two types of prostitutes see ADAMS (1983) 321-58; CALAME (1989); DAVIDSON (1997) 74-7; DOVER (1989) 20-1; HARVEY (1987) 242-54; HENRY (1992) 263; KURKE (1997) 106-150.

⁸ ADAMS (1983) 321-7.

⁹ As GREGORY (1982) 19 well puts it, 'commodity exchange establishes a relationship between the objects exchanged, whereas gift exchange establishes a relationship between the subjects.'

¹⁰ SALLER (1982) 13.

¹¹ DIXON (1993) 453. This did not mean, of course, as SALLER (1982) 11 and n. 15 elaborates, that philosophical ideals of friendship and the wide use of the term *amici* in social relations had a 'levelling effect' on Roman society; an egalitarian

terminology of social relations should not be confused with a society's actual social practice. The application of a flattening (and flattering) nomenclature of egalitarian friendship was generally used to gloss over actual distinctions between *amici*. Roman elite authors tend to frown on the overt and ostentatious ranking of friends; hence, Pliny disapproval (*Ep.* 2.6.2) of different quality food and wine being served to different ranks of friends at *symposia*; on the other hand, elsewhere he quite openly speaks (in a letter that was of course also published) of *amicitiae tam superiores quam minores* (*Ep.* 7.3.2), cf. SALLER (1982) 12 and GRIFFIN (2003) 97.

¹² DIXON (1993) 454.

¹³ COOPER AND PROCOPÉ (1995) 210.

¹⁴ *Ad M. Caes.* 1.3.4f; cf. SALLER (1982) 13.

¹⁵ ADAMS (1983) 324.

¹⁶ SALLER (1982) 12. It is in this gap between social representation and social reality that BOURDIEU (1977) 172 sees the 'misrecognition' or 'social repression' of the objective truth of economic reality.

¹⁷ GRIFFIN (2003) 105.

¹⁸ As GRIFFIN (2003) 105 also notes, Pliny's publication of his letters was inevitably in itself an act of self-promotion that contradicted the ideal of disinterested euergetism.

¹⁹ *Am.* 1.8.54

²⁰ For instance, in Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* (14), the *hetaira* Myrtale is offered a cheese by one lover and a necklace by another; such variability is of necessity also apparent in the exchanges of Rome's elite: 'precise evaluation and exact repayment of debt were rarely possible in the realm of day-to-day social favors' (SALLER [1982] 16).

²¹ *Truc.* 244-5.

²² Compare the similar use of the motif of barrenness at *Truc.* 241-3.

²³ *De Ben.*, 4.20; cf. Saller 14.

²⁴ HABINEK (1998) situates his study of Seneca's philosophical works precisely in the disjunction between ideology and practice.

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