

Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*

Function

“When a man who is pre-eminent in the state and in letters writes a satire that is directed not at a class or a movement but at an individual, it is legitimate to inquire into his motives.” (Coffey, p.169)

- entertainment? (nb possibility of performance at the Saturnalia) (Does this preclude serious points? Saturnalia time for mock-rule).
- revenge for banishment on trumped-up charge? (Coffey, p. 169)
- protest against deification (in general or specifically against Claudius’)? (Probably not part of campaign to get it rescinded: this doesn’t seem to have happened).
- attack on Agrippina (who sponsored the deification)? (but other opportunities for criticism missed)
- defence of Agrippina (poisoning omitted)? (But danger of accusing himself if poisoning mentioned; arguably hints eg comedians cover up)
- critique of Claudius’ policies?

• exploring appropriate roles for the new emperor Nero? Similar agenda to *De clementia* but in different form? “The function of the satire is to achieve the same political objects, by complementary means, as Seneca achieved practically, by framing Nero’s programme, and, theoretically, by addressing to him the discourse *De clementia* (A.D. 55-6).” (Eden, p. 12)

“It is, however, absurd to maintain that he conceived of the work as a manual of political behaviour like *de Clementia*. A satire may have political implications without being either a practical manifesto or a theoretical treatise.” (Coffey, p.171)

NB similarity between charges against Claudius in *Apocolocyntosis* and what Nero claims he will avoid, in his (Senecan-scripted) speech to senate (e.g. won’t abuse justice; power won’t be centred in imperial household, esp. in freedmen- more power to senate).

Tac. *Annals* 13.4 (p285-6, tr. Grant) Nero’s speech to the senate: “Then, outlining his future policy, he renounced everything that had occasioned recent unpopularity. ‘I will not judge every kind of case myself’, he said, ‘and give too free reign to the influence of a few individuals by hearing prosecutors and defendants behind my closed doors. From my house, bribery and favouritism will be excluded. I will keep personal and State affairs separate. The senate is to preserve its ancient functions. By applying to the consuls, people from Italy and the senatorial provinces may have access to its tribunals. I myself will look after the armies under my control.’”

“by making Nero and his friends laugh at the old values, he subtly insinuated into their minds a notion of what the new values were to be. But neither the author nor his audience committed themselves by their festive revelry, and to that extent the message remained provisional, ‘experimental’.” (Nauta, p. 95)

NB satire can include many targets

“To assign a single function to *Apocolocyntosis* as an exclusive explanation of its contents and form is to miss the many-sided subtleties of a work in which personal invective passes

imperceptibly into the criticisms of a statesman, and in which a fine literary craftsman, without going beyond what is appropriate for a satire, exhibits a wide range of stylistic virtuosity.” (Coffey, p. 172)