

A Companion to the Neronian Age
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CHAPTER 9
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Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*

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But, Caesar, can there be anyone so dull and stupid as to take pains over jesting?

(Julian, *Caesares* 306a)

Apocolocyntosis reigns supreme as the funniest piece of Neroniana. It is also one of the most baffling: jokes are not perhaps the classicist's forte. Philological rigor combines with a touch of Saturnalian release as scholars scrutinize the nature and consequence of Claudius' fatal deifecation (*Apoc.* 4.2): Athanassakis (1973, 1974) is the expert here, but we have Dobesch (2002) to thank for the suggestion that *animam ebulliit* ("he bubbled out his life") depicts a nasty case of diarrhea. Bigger questions are at stake too: *Apocolocyntosis* subjects imperial apotheosis to an extraordinary slapping, yet offers at the same time one of Roman literature's most exuberant acclamations of the emperor as living near-deity. Jokes about liberty and slavery are all very well when the tyrant is dead, but who really thinks freedom is on the cards under the new boy monarch? It also shows a side to Seneca that still causes unease. No sage meditations here: Seneca drops the philosopher's pallium and puts on jester's bells to frolic before his 16-going-on-17-year-old pupil and master, not to mention the rest of his audience. Where's the lesson now?

We'll skip the traditional précis: if you want to know what happens, go and read it. At 3000 words, it's shorter than any chapter in this book. Profit from the rare indulgence of the "green and yellow," complete with translation (Eden 1984). I will spare you lengthy dissection of author (Seneca), date (late AD 54), and title (something about a vegetable of the family *cucurbitaceae*). The first two have few doubters. As for the title, *quot homines tot colocyntae* (pick your own pumpkin): start with Eden (1984) 1–4 and Braund and James (1998) 298–301, or try the 50 pages of Heller (1985). Most would at least agree that it plays on the word "apotheosis" and that it is a joke at Claudius' expense. That Claudius does not in fact turn into a pumpkin, gourd-vine, or other

vegetable matter, need concern only the small-minded. Instead, this brief introduction to *Apocolocyntosis* will (1) assess its unique employment of Menippean satire in an accession context; (2) argue for a wider audience than many commentators suppose; (3) address the well-trodden but still controversial issue of skepticism at apotheosis; (4) finally, fumble with the stellar cameo in *Apocolocyntosis* 4.1 for the boy-king Nero, honorand of Seneca's work – and of our *Companion*.

Menippean Monarchy

Apocolocyntosis is a unique specimen, a near-complete Latin example of the peculiar genre of Menippean satire (just one lost manuscript leaf between *Apoc.* 7 and 8 spoils the show). Named for the third-century BC Cynic philosopher Menippus of Gadara (works now lost), this genre was and is defined by its unique blending of verse and prose, *genus mixtum* to Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.95), *prosimetrum* in mediaeval jargon (Riikonen (1987) 11–2; Relihan (1993) 12–21). This definition by form, characteristic of ancient analysis, tells only part of the story: like other varieties of satire, the genre is also marked by its ludic irreverence (Relihan (1993)). “Ludic irreverence” is at one level a good description of *Apocolocyntosis*, as the cheeky narrator puts us in our place before stripping poets, gods, and above all Claudius of their dignity. Yet Claudius, like every individual named in this piece bar Nero, was dead at the time of writing, and *Apocolocyntosis* gives every reason to suppose that showing irreverence to him was, in the new regime, anything but irreverent (Braund (1993)). According to this (common) view, Seneca co-opts the Menippean genre for a new brand of political loyalism. A contrary reading privileges the genre as interpretative determinant: for Relihan (1993) 75–90, followed by Paschalis (2009b) 202–4, *Apocolocyntosis*’ unreliable and credulous narrator divests himself of all authority; his wrongheaded criticisms of Claudius should thus elicit not mockery but sympathy for the dead *princeps*. Where the standard view may risk underplaying the satirical side, Relihan’s alternative vision loses sight of the political moment. My chapter will follow the mainstream, beginning with a review of political and (other) literary contexts which suggests that *Apocolocyntosis* adds up to a strong endorsement not just of Nero but of monarchy as an institution. Yet we will have to admit on the way that satire’s anti-authoritarian streak is a recurrent threat to any stability in *Apocolocyntosis*’ ideology of power.

Apocolocyntosis is just one example of a rising trend in first-century literature, of vilifying a dead emperor to praise a living one. Claudius is made a counterexemplary *princeps*, a monster with monstrous rule, while the beautiful boy Nero promises an idyllic golden age to come (Braund and James (1998)). Seneca was practiced in such techniques: his treatise on anger, written early in Claudius’ principate, makes the freshly deceased Caligula a prime example of failed self-control (Fillion-Lahille (1984) 273–82), and two or three years later his *Consolation to Polybius* begs that the “madness” of Caligula’s rule be remedied by the godlike Claudius (13.1). Later authors would line up to denounce Nero to the benefit of Flavian emperors, Domitian to the benefit of Trajan (Ramage (1989)). Of course vilification of his predecessor was not the only possible treatment which an emperor might encourage or tolerate; one might instead, especially when handling a brother or father, celebrate the predecessor and stake a claim as his

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heir. Nero notoriously did both, deifying Claudius (his stepfather, father-in-law, and adoptive father) and taking the title *diui filius* ("son of a deity") in public, joking about murderous mushrooms in private. So runs the familiar tale, though Nero, only 16 at accession, was surely not pulling all the strings. What matters to us is that his tutor Seneca was in the most intimate of Palatine circles, and that *Apocolocyntosis* followed hard on Claudius' death. It thus joins *On Clemency* as a prime witness of Neronian accession literature. Written some time the following year, that altogether more strait-laced work steers Nero towards good governance, and advertises Seneca's place at the heart of it to his broader senatorial readership (Braund (2009) 1–76). Where *Apocolocyntosis* for the most part dwells on Claudius, exposing autocracy gone wrong, *On Clemency* presents the other side of the coin, focusing on the ideal ruler Nero should be. There is no reason to suppose Seneca thought of them as a diptych, but reading them together can be productive (Leach (1989); Braund and James (1998)): despite their differences, the view of monarchy on offer in these two texts proves surprisingly coherent.

Take the motif of freedom which frames *Apocolocyntosis*. Our blasé narrator begins his tale by assuring us he'll refuse to name his sources if he wants. "Who's going to force me? I know that I was set free (*scio me liberum factum*) when [Claudius] breathed his last" (translations are mostly mine). If Claudius' death brought freedom, his principate meant slavery. As Eden (1984: 63) notes, our narrator is not promising to say what he likes, but asserting first his right *not* to speak. Only after this does he make the complementary promise that "if I feel like replying" (*si libuerit respondere*, playing, despite the different vowel quantity, on *liberum factum*) he'll say whatever comes to mind. Silence is a right he claims only in principle: in practice, Saturnalian license will reign. Whether or not *Apocolocyntosis* was written for the Saturnalia of December 54, this text revels in the paradox of making Claudius, the *Saturnalicus princeps* (8.2), a "lord of misrule" whose party turned sour, while at the same time exuding the mood of carnival and freedom triggered by his death (Nauta (1987); Versnel (1993b)).

Having begun with the manumission of our narrator, *Apocolocyntosis* ends with the enslavement of Claudius. Condemned to the eternal torture of a perforated dice-box (hell for a gambler like him, 12.3.30–31), Claudius finds his sentence transmuted, as Caligula makes a sudden appearance to claim him as his slave (15.2). His new penalty is to work for Caligula's freedman Menander in an infernal equivalent of the Palatine civil service (I follow Eden's emended text, but differ in making Menander, not Claudius, the "secretary for petitions": so already Heinze (1926) 77–8). The task might seem appealing to this court-addict (7.4–5, 10.4, 12.3.19–28) – but now he will not be *princeps*, nor even the kind of freedman secretary who under Claudius ruled the roost (6.2). To be slave to your nephew would be bad enough, worse still when that nephew is Caligula; but (by my reading) Claudius goes one step further down the ladder, slave not just to Caligula but to his freedman.

This final enslavement generates ring-composition with *Apocolocyntosis*' opening declaration of *libertas* and a healthy dose of poetic justice. But how straightforward is the mirroring of Claudius and narrator? Claudius, in the fiction of the satire, will be a slave forever. Is the freedom of our satirist permanent? The Saturnalia, we recall, lasts only a week or so – and whatever Seneca's relationship to the narrator, his time in the role of unsenatorial (Encolpian?) Fool is strictly confined to this one appearance.

Libertas appears just once more in *Apocolocyntosis*. As Claudius passes by his funeral, we glimpse the celebrating crowd: "everyone was happy and merry. The Roman people were walking about like free men" (*omnes laeti, hilari: populus Romanus ambulabat tamquam liber*, 12.3). I reproduce here Eden's translation, which (inevitably) loses the ambiguity of *tamquam*, a conjunction that neither confirms nor denies their freedom. Still, one may, like Robinson (2005: 250), suspect provocation. In withholding confirmation that the *populus* is indeed free, is Seneca *challenging* the rhetoric of freedom? In Robinson's favor is the Menippean context: in the genre which strains against authority, the one thing that *is* authorized is semantic free play. Nevertheless, even if we accept the possible implication that the Roman people is *not* really free even under Nero, to suspect subversion here seems to me misplaced.

Seneca's (largely consistent) public view of imperial autocracy is a pragmatic one (Griffin (1976) 129–221). The vicissitudes of the late Republic had damaged Rome so badly and so permanently that enlightened monarchy was the only salvation: as he later put it, Pompey had "brought the Roman people into such a state that it could not be saved except by *the favor of slavery* (*beneficio servitutis*)" (*On Benefits* 5.16.4). Monarchy is slavery, but a slavery to be embraced. On this point even *On Clemency*, where Seneca is working hard to advertise autocracy, is forthright. At the opening he describes the plebs as "quarrelling, seditious, and wild, sure to run riot to the destruction of others and itself alike, if it breaks this yoke (*si hoc iugum fregerit*)" (*On Clemency* 1.1.1). Later he describes how the young Augustus' clemency won him popularity "although he had taken hold of the Roman people's neck when it was not yet broken in (*nondum subactis populi Romani ceruicibus*)" (*On Clemency* 1.10.2). At both points Seneca is clear that the Roman people have, by Nero's time, been "yoked": this hard metaphor of animalistic slavery – subjugation – leaves little room for dewy-eyed republican sentimentality. But we should notice that in *On Clemency* 1.1.1 the yoke is imposed specifically on the plebs, while in *On Clemency* 1.10.2, *On Benefits* 5.16.4, and our passage in *Apocolocyntosis* 12.3, Seneca speaks of the *populus Romanus*. While not explicitly excluding the senatorial elite, defining enslavement in terms of the *populus* gives Seneca some wriggle room when the sticky question arises, are the people who really matter slaves to the emperor too? You won't catch him saying so, and when Caligula demands explicitly slavish behavior from a senator Seneca is outraged (*On Benefits* 2.12.2): senators *are* a different matter. Coming from *On Clemency*, we see the passing "freedom" of the *populus* in *Apoc.* 12.3 for what it is. Their party will have to come to an end, and that, in Seneca's terms, presents no ideological embarrassment.

Libertas is one – very sensitive – area where Saturnalian inversion and Menippean play hold out potential for a "subversive" *Apocolocyntosis*. Yet reading in the context of other Senecan literature allows a view in which even denying freedom is, in crude terms, more regime-friendly than regime-hostile. In any case, Seneca *is* the regime. Little surprise, then, that in its relentless *ad hominem* attack on Claudius, not to mention the praise of Nero to which we will come later, *Apocolocyntosis* underwrites not just Nero as regent but the Principate as institution (Kloft (1972) 215–21). Risky topics like the emperor's relationship with the Senate are displaced into tidy specifics of *Claudian* injustice (Raafaub (1989) 34–5); the autocracy of a good emperor, on these terms, is *justified* by the exposure of Claudian misrule.

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Who's Laughing Anyway?

But to speak of Seneca justifying monarchy invites questions of audience. For whom was he writing? How was this text first performed? How far was it disseminated? Most have now moved beyond a crudely author-focused view of an *Apocolocyntosis* in which Seneca spits bile in revenge for his Claudian exile (Currie (1962)). Eden (1984: 12–13), for instance, maintains that “the chief function of the work is obliquely didactic” and that “the intended audience was Nero and his intimates.” The first of these suggestions depends on privileging the criticisms of Claudius’ governance – high senatorial death counts, maladministration, subservience to freedmen – and ignoring the heavy emphasis on personal ridicule of Claudius as mentally and physically unfit to rule: stammering and limping are hardly faults which Nero can be advised not to develop. Equally, the praise of Nero in *Apoc.* 4.1 is hard to hold up as protreptic (advice masquerading as praise). The idea that Seneca is encouraging him to continue with new, enlightened policies (Griffin (1976) 130) is difficult to sustain given that amidst the extensive praise of Nero’s beauty and singing ability, only three words concern policy, and in the vaguest terms: *legumque silentia rumpet* (“and he will break the silence of the laws”). Merfeld (1999: 68–9) ingeniously, but perversely, suggests that Apollo’s commendation of Nero here is ironic: by dwelling on looks and voice so conspicuously, Seneca demonstrates the need to leave childish vanity behind. If that was his purpose, he hid it exceptionally well. Despite the current scholarly mantra that imperial panegyric functions through protreptic, it is hard to neutralize *Apocolocyntosis* in those terms.

Whether or not Seneca intends Nero as a primary reader or listener, it would be crass to make him the only one. Many scholars, like Eden, imagine an audience restricted to the imperial court, for two broad reasons. First, the argument runs, it is incredible that a wider, senatorial readership could tolerate such explicit mockery of their recent edict deifying Claudius; this would effectively strip Nero’s title *divi filius* of all force, and expose the funeral speech written by Seneca and delivered by Nero as sheer hypocrisy. Further, the cynical handling of state religion, the very institution of apotheosis, would be unacceptable in society at large. Second, the text looks and feels like it was written for a recitation; especially if we take it to be a party-piece for the Saturnalia, the intimate setting of the court is a likely scenario. Thereafter the work disappeared for several centuries (Eden (1984) 8), or circulated among court circles, perhaps anonymously (Münscher (1922) 5: see Eden (1984) 7), or, in Dobesch’s (2002: 67) imaginative formulation, did the rounds as “the latest anonymous work of Seneca.”

Several of these arguments cause difficulty, starting with recitation. It is certainly plausible that *Apocolocyntosis* was recited at the Saturnalia, as argued best by Nauta (1987). The second-person plurals in the miniature second preface (5) suggest as much, and the line *talis Caesar adest* (“such a Caesar is at hand,” 4.1.30) would be piquant with an emperor in the room (Cole (2006) 182). Yet Seneca takes no pains to be consistent about his second-person verbs: the opening addresses, in mock historical style, a single reader or listener, and in any case “traces of recitation,” as Nauta (1987: 77–8) confesses, can just as well be inserted by artifice. But whatever *Apocolocyntosis*’s first outing, that says nothing about its reception thereafter. A typical pattern of literary

dissemination was one or more private recitations followed by wider circulation (Kenney (1982); Johnson (2000)). Recitation was a crucial first step, but not the only one. Why make *Apocolocyntosis* an exception? Its sheer quality suggests a level of care which it is hard to imagine would be lavished on a one-off performance piece: the swirling wit, complex play, and tight structure look anything but ephemeral. Could Seneca have expended such efforts on a piece which only a handful of people would hear, on one night only?

Then there are the echoes which have been heard in Neronian, Flavian, and Trajanic literature and beyond – in Petronius (Courtney (1991) 11; Paschalis (2009a)), Persius (Verdière (1956) 345–6), pseudo-Seneca *Octavia* (Marti (1952); Hoyos (2005)), the younger Pliny (Whitton (2010) 137 n.124), Tacitus (Dickison (1977); O’Gorman (2005) 106–7), Juvenal (Courtney (1980) 197–8, 344; Hardie (1997–8) 120), Suetonius (Schmidt (1988); Jones (2000) 122), and Calpurnius Siculus (who, as Horsfall (1997: 180) demonstrates, alludes to Seneca in *Eclogues* 4.139–41 and not *vice versa*); consider too Silius Italicus *Punica* 8.559–61, a semi-divine Scipio to match the Nero of *Apoc.* 4.1.30–2. Of course these perceived echoes may (and some surely do) tell more about modern over-ingenuity than ancient reception, but you only have to buy one or two to accept that *Apocolocyntosis* had entered a broader circulation in the literary elite. Arguments from silence, such as Tacitus’ failure to mention it, are scant defense. Finally, Cassius Dio’s knowledge of the work in the third century (*Roman History* 60.35.2) and the unanimity of manuscripts in attributing it to Seneca (Reeve (1984)) are hard to reconcile with public suppression or anonymous circulation.

As for arguments *against* a wider readership, a central difficulty is the glib use of the terms “court” and “Senate,” as if the two were detached, separately uniform and mutually exclusive. Society was far more complex: not to mention the most obvious court–Senate overlap in our case (Seneca), the court was a flexible institution – anything from the emperor and a few individuals (family, freedmen, senatorial advisors) to large gatherings including hundreds of senators (Wallace-Hadrill (1996); Winterling (2009) 79–102). At the same time we can be sure that the Senate was no homogeneous group of identikit ideologues. To maintain therefore that “the court” could mock Claudius’ deification privately, while “the Senate” was unable to see through, or admit, the farce of his apotheosis, is grossly reductive. It also ignores Tacitus’ view of autumn AD 54. He arranges his narrative so that the decree of *consecratio* which elevated Claudius to heaven (*Annals* 13.2.3) immediately precedes the funeral at which “no one” could help laughing at Nero’s speech praising Claudius’ foresight and wisdom (*Annals* 13.3.1). Whatever the accuracy of his chronology (Fishwick (2002)), Tacitus’ juxtaposition is eloquent, generating a quick double-step of deification and mockery – all this in the very un-Palatine sphere of senate-house and forum. Who were those po-faced senators who, according to many scholars, could not see the funny side of making Claudius a god? The *vire d’exclusion* which encouraged the “court” to cohere in reviling Claudius and accepting Nero, and the *Ventilsitten* (“letting off steam”) which allowed a moment’s Saturnalian release before knuckling down to life under fresh autocracy (Nauta (1987) 90–6), could be just as effective in the wider readership of the literary elite. (Of course “literary elite” is a monolithic term with its own imprecisions, but it is a necessary improvement on the fallacy that the (illiterate) “populace” taken whole could savor literature like this (Grimal (1991) 113).)

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Apocolocyntosis need not be directed minutely at Nero, or even at his immediate circle. Like Leach (1989) – but with less credence in irony and subversion – I suggest a broader readership including much or all of the senatorial order. But one large area of doubt remains to be confronted, concerning religion and skepticism. Could Seneca really be so publicly irreverent to apotheosis?

De-deification

With its uniquely parodic treatment of deification, *Apocolocyntosis* exerts a fatal fascination on cultural historians. Is it proof that no one really believed all the mumbo-jumbo (Eden (1984) 7), or conversely of the stability of an imperial cult which could tolerate such satire (Feeney (1991) 110–11)? Is Seneca exploding the myth of apotheosis, or defending a nascent religion by legislating against an injustice like Divus Claudius (Price (1987) 87–9; Cole (2006))? Is this proof of two-tier godhead, which denies Claudius “absolute divinity” and the title *deus*, but leaves his “relative divinity,” the title *divus* awarded by the Senate, intact (Gradel (2002) 325–30)? The debate has been extensive, and the questions are intricate. My response will be in line with what you’ve read so far: despite the potential for destabilization, *Apocolocyntosis* conspires (with my reading) to tell a “loyal” story: Claudius’ deification is meaningless, but that of Augustus, potential paradigm for any future emperor, was not. “Meaning,” for our purposes, concerns the elite discourse of acceptance: “belief,” the plebs, and the provinces can be left aside as we assess *Apocolocyntosis* as an elite text for elite consumption in Rome.

The rules of the game are spelled out in the opening paragraph, as our narrator cites his authority (1.2):

if I must produce a witness, ask the man who saw Drusilla going to heaven: he will say that he saw Claudius making the journey “with unequal step” [*non passibus aequis*]. Whether he likes it or not, he can’t help seeing everything that goes on in heaven: he’s the curator of the Via Appia, the way, as you know, both the Deified Augustus and the emperor Tiberius went to the gods [*qua scis et Divum Augustum et Tiberium Caesarem ad deos isse*].

This travesty of historical enquiry is a demolition job on Livius Geminius, the senator who testified to Drusilla’s ascension 16 years previously (Dio 59.11.4), and whom Seneca conjures up as his pseudo-source for that of Claudius. Every detail redounds to Geminius’ discredit, starting with Drusilla, the sister-lover of Caligula deified on her death in AD 38. Seneca damns Caligula throughout his works, and his attitude to Drusilla’s apotheosis, as to Caligula’s assumed godhead in life, is patently skeptical: what good news *that* was (*tam bono nuntio*, 1.3; cf. *On Tranquility of Mind* 14.9 with Barrett (1989) 290 n.52). The very first person named in *Apocolocyntosis*, then, and the woman with whom Claudius is aligned, is the exemplar of deification abused. But the sarcasm stretches to encompass ascension itself. That famous Virgilian image of Claudius limping his way to heaven (a twist on *Aeneid* 2.724) is not just mockery of his disability, but grotesque confusion of the physical (a man walking) and the figurative (the journey from mortality to divinity). It is one thing to talk abstractly about “going to heaven” (*euntem in caelum*), but to specify “limping,” to force the visualization, is a different matter. Absurd literalism continues with Geminius’ job as curator of the Via Appia. This,

our *faux ingénu* narrator assures us, is ideal qualification, since Augustus and Tiberius both travelled that way to the gods. Again, the joke lies in fusing the physical and the figurative. Both Augustus and Tiberius died in Campania, meaning that each departed Rome for his final journey south along the Appia (*pace* Eden (1984) 66, Russo (1985) 49, Lund (1994) 62, and Green (2010) 275, who all take Seneca to mean the journey of the corpses back to Rome). By muddling this journey down the main road with the metaphorical “journey” of deification from this world to the next, Seneca reaches the conclusion that heaven must lie down the Appia and that Geminus accordingly has a good view of it. He marks the absurdity by including Tiberius, an emperor who we all know was *not* deified. The incongruity is hard to miss, given the nomenclature (*Divus Augustus* but ostentatiously not-*Divus Tiberius Caesar*) and the provocative pointer *scis* – “you know” – accompanying a statement which we know precisely to be false. This is no slip by Seneca (Eden (1984) 66) or by his narrator (Relihan (1993) 79), no proof that ascension had been attested for Tiberius (Bickermann (1929) 101), no attempt to elevate Tiberius to some alternative pantheon (Cole (2006) 179–80), above all no marker of “serious” intent (Green (2010) 275): it is a blatant ironic flag. It is no more true that Tiberius went to the gods than that the Via Appia leads to heaven. Geminus’ testimony is destroyed, and with it any notion of (literal) ascension.

Where does this leave Augustus? Is the veracity of *his* deification in question too? This looks like tricky interpretative ground. For one thing *Divus Augustus* has a cardinal role to play in the satire to come: his intervention will turn the course of the heavenly debate and guarantee Claudius’ damnation; it will also intensify *Apocolocyntosis*’ assault, denouncing him as not just crippled fool but also serial murderer. Will the internal logic of the satire not collapse if we deny him his own place in the divine council to start with? Besides, it is one thing to mock Drusilla’s deification and Tiberius’ lack of it, but to question the apotheosis of Augustus would imply an outright attack on the system of imperial consecration itself.

It is important to locate Seneca’s joke precisely. To point out that neither Augustus nor Tiberius went to heaven down the Via Appia is not to deny that Augustus reached heaven at all. The axis of mockery is the notion of a *physical* journey to heaven. Outside the conventions of epic, the journey between mortality and immortality, earth and heaven (or hell), is slippery – and so potentially funny – ontological ground. Lucian begins his *Icaromenippus* with Menippus tallying up the distance he travelled to heaven: “so, it was three hundred miles from the earth to the moon . . . from there up to the sun around fifteen hundred miles more . . . and then about a day’s flying for an eagle travelling light.” Lucian’s joke, of course, lies in taking “heaven above” literally: when mythology and mundanity coincide, friction is inevitable. That friction is the source of much of Ovid’s spice when he fuses Roman history with the divine apparatus of mythology in the *Metamorphoses*, not least in the chain of deifications including Hercules, Romulus, and Julius Caesar (Feeney (1991) 205–24); the ascension of Romulus also earns a sly joke in the *Fasti* (2.475–514: Barchiesi (1997) 112–19). Recounting tales of apotheosis with wide-eyed innocence, Ovid constantly threatens to destabilize these Roman and Julian myths by taking them just too literally. When therefore Seneca’s Diespiter proposes that Claudius be deified and “added to the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid” (9.5), the evocation of Ovid’s divine debates is elegant (Feeney (1991) 207), but the joke is also perhaps on Diespiter himself, for failing to see that deification by the rules of the *Metamorphoses*

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brings as much risk as glory. Yet Ovid is by no means the only author to raise questions about apotheosis. On the contrary, credence in literal, physical ascension was no more the norm in imperial elite discourse than it was in that of the Republic. Comments on the death and supposed deification of Romulus, first king and first Roman deificand, make this plain: Cicero (*Republic* 2.17–20), Livy (1.15.6–1.16.8) and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Roman Antiquities* 2.56) are all more interested in the fact that the plebs believed it than in endorsing its “truth” (cf. Plutarch, *Romulus* 27–8; *Numa* 2; for the extensive debate on Livy, see Sailor (2006) 345–8). When Seneca jokes about the route to heaven, even in terms of the imperial cult, it is neither new nor shocking.

How then *did* Augustus “go to the gods”? In a nutshell, deification could be made palatable in elite literature by playing down the physical side and focusing on, let us say, the figurative: take away the anthropomorphic image of gods in heaven above, and think in more abstract terms. Godhead is not sitting on a cloud, but the reward for a life of virtue. (I schematize, of course: to sample the vast scholarly debate, see Hopkins (1978) 197–242; Price (1984, 1987); Beard and Henderson (1998); Gradel (2002) 261–371.) The idea that divinity could be achieved through merit was long-lived and flexible, from the mythological import Hercules through philosophers’ heroes like Cicero’s Scipio (*Republic* 6) and Lucretius’ Epicurus (*De Rerum Natura* 5.1–54), and it is not hard to see how it could be adapted for the purposes of the Principate: if deification is the reward for an exceptional human, that in imperial terms means the *princeps*. So for the elder Pliny, writing in the AD 70s, belief in divine anthropomorphism is childish delusion, but that is not to deny the existence of divinity: “*god* means for one mortal to help another (*deus est mortali iuvare mortalem*), and this is the route to eternal glory” – a route which, he affirms, Vespasian is now treading (*Natural History* 2.17–18). Of course apotheosis was a fluid institution, especially in the early decades of the Principate, and elite discourse has room both for the loyalist rationalizing of a Pliny and for the bitter cynicism of a Lucan (*Civil War* 7.445–9; Feeney (1991) 297–8). But *Apocolocyntosis*, I suggest, need not be rocking any institutional boat.

It is precisely the flexibility of discourse which allows Seneca to disenfranchise Claudius without necessarily challenging Augustus and the institution exemplified in him. Consider again Claudius’ hapless advocate Diespiter. He claims that Claudius deserves his place in heaven as a blood-relative first of his (adoptive) grandfather Divus Augustus, second of “his grandmother Diva Augusta, whom he personally ordered to be a god (*quam ipse deam esse iussit*)” (9.5). Just in case we forget that Livia was deified, so becoming Diva Augusta, not on her death in AD 29 but at Claudius’ instigation over a decade later, Diespiter makes the point explicitly. It is a spectacular rhetorical misfire (Kraft (1966) 108), exposing his own weakness as advocate and Claudius’ cynical self-interest in deifying her in the first place: like Drusilla, Livia is marked for her “sham deification” (Cole (2006) 180–81). Of course, while poets might sing of gods claiming emperors for their own, everyone knew that imperial deification depended on human agency – a senatorial decree – and the obvious benefit to the successor of acquiring gods in the family left the process open to cynicism. Does this spiral out to touch Nero, equally cynical beneficiary of Claudius’ apotheosis, or Augustus, the man with most to gain from the title *Divus Iulius*? No text can restrain all waves of implication (though acknowledging human agency could be the basis for panegyric as much as for critique: e.g. Velleius 2.126.1; Pliny *Panegyric* 11.1–4). Yet *Apocolocyntosis* nowhere suggests

that Nero depends on his claim as “son of a god,” *divi filius*: on the contrary, it writes out Claudius altogether from his claim to power. This is not to isolate Claudius as interloper in an otherwise Julian line (Kraft (1966); Wiseman (1982) 58): Caligula and Tiberius hardly look preferable. Instead *Apocolocyntosis*, like *On Clemency*, knocks out all intervening Julio-Claudians between Nero and Augustus: what matters is not so much blood relationship – nowhere mentioned – as the first emperor’s exemplary value. As for Augustus’ divine father Julius, he is remarkably absent from this celestial stage, lacuna notwithstanding (as from *On Clemency*: on Seneca’s general ambivalence toward Julius, see Griffin (1976) 184–8; Leigh (2009)). If *Apocolocyntosis* were an attack on Julio-Claudian apotheosis taken whole, the silence would be hard to explain: here was the foundational moment of deification as power politics, the invader of his own country paraded as a god for his adoptive son’s benefit. Instead Augustus, cleansed of that potential Julian blemish, is left to stand on his own merits as paradigm and justification for autocracy.

Of course Divus Augustus is caught up in the farce, both through his participation in the pseudo-epic charade of a senatorial debate, and in his speech’s satirical blend of grand and comic, as he quotes his *Res Gestae* and deploys high rhetorical aposiopesis one moment (10.2), compares Claudius with a squatting dog the next (10.3). There is nothing new about this: Lucilius had given Romulus similar treatment in his satirical “Council of the Gods” (Manuwald (2009)), as the quotation in *Apoc.* 9.5 reminds us. Some critics have gone further, reading the speech as an explosion of his *auctoritas* (Alexander (1949); Jal (1957) 251–5; Wolf (1986)). Others are less convinced: to splash with satire is not to damn (Zwierlein (1982); Bringmann (1985) 899–900; Jakobi (1988)); *pudet imperii* (“I am ashamed of my power,” 10.2) is the most dangerous moment (Eden (1984) 117), but not necessarily fatal (Kraft 1966: 105–6; Griffin 1976: 217 n.1; Horstkotte 1989: 345–6). Most importantly, his place among the gods is never challenged: unlike the bumbling Hercules, who fears that his own status as deified mortal is at stake in this trial (9.6), Augustus blackballs Claudius in easy security. Exposing grades of divinity must threaten instability, but the text pushes to shift that danger onto Hercules and away from Augustus.

The result is a first emperor who resembles that of *On Clemency*. In both texts he is paradigm and legitimation for the Principate, but in both he is also imperfect: Nero can be not just another Augustus but a better one. *On Clemency* combines untethered criticism of Augustus’ cruelty in his youth with praise for his later conversion to clemency. Although less commendable than what Seneca urges on Nero – clemency from the start – it was thanks to this policy that “we believe him to be a god, and not because we are so commanded (*deum esse non tamquam iussi credimus*)” (*On Clemency* 1.10.3). Here is Seneca’s loyalist spin on Augustus’ apotheosis: no talk of ascension, but an emphasis on merit and on acceptance (Cole (2006) 180). There is an implicit contrast with deifications like that of Drusilla and Livia, instances where (from a post-Claudian standpoint) the imperial machinery had been abused, where compliance had required “belief” under orders. In elite discourse acceptance is self-fulfilling: deny it and Drusilla is not a god; agree that Augustus deserved his divinity, and he did.

Satire is generically disposed to challenge authority. Whether you give free play to every uncomfortable implication in the text, or posit some effort on the part of the author to control such implications, is an open choice. Deified Augustus stands on an

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inevitably precarious pedestal, but *Apocolocyntosis*, as I read it, makes no effort to knock him off. This is not simply (or even primarily) protreptic: *Apocolocyntosis* puts far less emphasis than does *On Clemency* on holding out to Nero a future, Augustan deification. It does, however, share *On Clemency*'s concern with a wider audience. For all its surreal farce, *Apocolocyntosis* (I suggest) is selling Seneca's own brand of loyalism, a cleansed concept of deification and so of monarchy. By laughing Claudius away, *Apocolocyntosis* can sanitize as much as it satirizes imperial, Augustan apotheosis. As for Nero's future, it's early days, and a dangerous question to ask while the emperor is still alive (Caligula's appropriation of living godhead was no happy memory). Still, the boy-*princeps* is at least touched with the divine, in the challenging and crucial passage which will occupy the remainder of this chapter: the *laudes Neronis*.

Problems with Praise

As Claudius gasps his last, the action moves to the divine plane (3.1), where Mercury asks Clotho, one of the three *Parcae* (Fates), to let the old man die at last. She consents, and the narrative slips into verse as she snaps off the ugly thread of Claudius' life. But before the effect is seen on earth, 30 more hexameters describe the *Parcae*'s wondrous weaving of a new, golden thread, at once Nero's life and the Golden Age he will bring. Apollo urges them on, prophesying the advent of this rising star, an image of the Sun and of Apollo alike. Back in prose, Clotho's sister Lachesis obliges and gives Nero long life; a trimeter from Euripides orders Claudius' burial; and, with Claudius bubbling out his life, the divine interlude is over (4.2).

The *laudes Neronis* of *Apocolocyntosis* 4.1 are remarkable, one of the most extravagant literary encomia of Nero, and of any first-century emperor, that we possess. This is already a challenge: panegyric is a fragile mode, one which makes modern readers uncomfortable. But what happens to panegyric when you put it into Menippean satire? Can these verses hold their own amid the parody which swirls around them? Then there is the style. Is this poetry bad? Is it *deliberately* bad? Often mentioned in passing as exuberant encomium, these lines have, under closer examination, provoked strong reactions. For the forthright Ball (1902: 169) "there is no sufficient artistic apology for the lines." Boatwright (1986: 10) is more nuanced but essentially in agreement: this poetry "exemplifies its period, when *indulgence in excess perverted and masked* Nero's Augustan models and much of Roman tradition" (my emphasis). Eden (1984: 75) for his part reports that the "facile elisionless flow presents expected images in formalized word-patterns with insipid blandness." But, unlike Boatwright, he credits Seneca with knowing it: this is parody, in which "the author makes his literary point by holding a mirror up to uninventive mediocrity." Is Nero in on the joke? Eden is cautious (talking only of "*literary* point"), but, in the most politically provocative reading, Robinson (2005: 252–4) seizes on "the exaggerated encomiastic imagery that [*Apoc.* 4.1] mechanically assembles" to conclude that an already disenchanted Seneca is satirizing his panegyric at Nero's expense.

These critics are in broad agreement on one point, that the hexameters of *Apoc.* 4.1 are stylistically inept (for a rare but unsubstantiated defense, see Nussbaum (2009) 101–2). Before addressing this, let me consider two other sticking-points: panegyric and genre. Robinson's skepticism accords with a trend in recent decades of redeeming

distasteful encomia by imputing political satire. Flattery of Nero has attracted ample attention: Lucan's proem, Lucilius' epigrams, Calpurnius Siculus, and the Einsiedeln *Eclogues* – all have been suspected of overloaded praise. In the case of *Apocolocyntosis* such "subversion" seems at once less and more likely. Less likely because of all these literary products it originates closest to the emperor himself: can you really imagine Nero, a native speaker of Latin and practiced poet, failing to spot satire which seems so evident to a modern critic relying on our second-hand grasp of language and artistry? On the other hand, the generic context is uniquely threatening to a "straight" reading. Not only is Menippean satire the destabilizing genre *par excellence*, this one actually features a scene of false poetic praise. As Claudius listens to the funeral dirge celebrating his valor, physical excellence, and justice, the ironies are deafening – to everyone except him (12.3–13.1). The structure of *Apocolocyntosis* encourages comparison of that scene of "praise" (*laudibus*, 13.1) with the "excessive praise" of the Parcae (*nimis... laudant*, 4.1.18) as they spin Nero's thread: these are by far the two longest verse sections (of the five which punctuate the satire), and are symmetrically placed, articulating Claudius' ascent to heaven and descent to hell (Weinreich (1923) 132; Korzeniewski (1982) 103–8). What is more, four of those five verse sections introduce high style only to deflate it: the long-winded poetic descriptions of time and season (2.1 and 2.4), the parody of Seneca's own *Hercules Furens* in the mouth of buffoon Hercules (7.2), and the absurd mock-epic ecphrasis on Claudius' temporary eternal damnation as a latter-day Danaid (15.1) all conspire, like the funeral dirge, to drag their verses down into the mud of the framing prose. Can we shelter the *laudes Neronis*, uniquely, from the same fate?

One approach, necessarily circular but not therefore illegitimate, is simply to say "yes." Here critics as disparate as Weinreich (1923: 37) and Relihan (1993: 82) can agree: *Apoc.* 4.1 is exceptional, as Seneca bends the generic rules to fit praise of Nero into the anarchy of his satire. Seen another way, it is wholly *unexceptional* within the thrust of *Apocolocyntosis* as a whole, which insistently contrasts counterexemplary Claudius with wonder-boy Nero. Whereas the praise of Claudius at his funeral is demonstrably false within the "truth" of the satire (his swiftness of foot in 12.3.6–7, for instance, is contradicted by the jokes at his lameness in 1.2 and 5.2), that of Nero is not. Of course this is partly because Nero is not mentioned outside this scene, but even in the encomium Seneca leaves few hostages to fortune: along with the vague promise of happy times to come, he includes no specifics beyond youth, beauty, and vocal prowess, safe enough material for this teenager. As for the prose/verse divide, it is less sharp than critics suggest. Claudius' death occupies not only the surrounding prose but also the first two verses, ugly in content but as elegant in style as what follows. Equally, the spinning of Nero's life fills not just 30 hexameters, but also the first line or two of the prose which comes after: "So Apollo. And Lachesis, since she too liked the wonderfully fair fellow, gave generously and bestowed on Nero many years from her own supply. As for Claudius..." (4.2). According to Eden (1984: 79), the "sudden drop in stylistic level...pricks the pretended seriousness of the verse." But it surely does quite the opposite, as prose affirms in its own idiom the sentiment of the verse: Nero of the "fair thread" (*formoso... filo*, 4.1.9), Apollo's equal in beauty, becomes a "wonderfully fair fellow" (*homini formosissimo*); Lachesis is as unstinting here as she and her sisters were in the hexameters. Low prose and high verse conspire in their mythologized variation on the theme *vivat rex*: exuberant praise is not confined to the vulnerable casing of poetry.

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None of this means that Seneca's poetry cannot intend *literary* parody. A combination of irreverence (towards panegyrists) and reverence (towards the emperor) would be an attractive blend of wit and encomium. But is it fair of Eden *et al.* to call these verses insipid, indulgent, inexcusable? The passage has perhaps suffered from the common assumption that *Apocolocyntosis* was a hasty squib to amuse a small (and drunk?) audience. It is easy to dismiss ephemeral poetry as bad – but even if this satire *were* ephemeral, that would make a poor criterion for aesthetic judgment. What happens if we approach this as potentially rich, seriously intended verse? Boatwright (1986) is one result, a useful if sometimes naïve assessment of stylistic specifics. One of those is repetition, about which Seneca is remarkably blasé. Sometimes it is pointed, as when the phrases *stamina fuso* (vv. 1, 13) and *tempora uitae* (vv. 2, 21) describe the contrasting fates of Claudius and Nero. Other instances are less easy to explain: *pensa*, for instance, occurs three times within 10 lines (vv. 7, 11, 16). *Pensum* is a pregnant term, meaning literally “weighed out portion of raw wool for spinning” and metaphorically “task” (hence v. 11 *sunt dulcia pensa*, “their wool/task is delightful”), perhaps also evoking through etymology (*pendere*, “weigh”) the Homeric image of Zeus balancing the scales of Fate (Onians (1954) 409–10). A rich word, then, but is this nevertheless a case of “monotonous repetition” (Eden (1984) 76)?

Caution is necessary: we cannot assume that ancient poets uniformly shared our modern preference for avoiding repetition unless it serves an immediate rhetorical purpose (Wills (1996) 473–7). Ovid, for instance, is often tolerant of such “unmarked” repetition, to the point of allowing *undas* to end three lines out of eleven in *Heroides* 19 (Kenney (1996) 24, 103–4). Seneca's nephew Lucan is notorious for it (Housman (1926) xxxiii), and Seneca himself is permissive in his tragedies, not just at the level of individual words: a still-influential study comments on the “sameness of style or expression which is disagreeable alike to the mind and the ear” (Canter (1925) 76). We can scarcely presume, then, that Seneca shared the judgment of some modern critics about the deficient taste of his age. Yet the abundance of repetition here may lend itself to a more positive explanation. As the Parcae spin their longest ever thread, the poetry responds with conspicuous excess, not (I suggest) as grotesquerie, but in an eloquent and witty marriage of matter and manner.

Nero's hexameters are defined by excess from the triple description of Lachesis' hair in their opening lines (*comas... capillos... | crinem*, three synonyms for “hair,” vv. 3–4) to the flowing locks of Apolline Nero in the last (*affuso... capillo*, v. 32): length and abundance ring-composes the passage. It goes well beyond the repetition of single words, or the strangely similar pair of “golden” lines (vv. 9 and 13), or even the piled-up star and sun similes (vv. 25–9): the most striking redundancy is the spinning of Nero's thread itself. This is not just unstoppable: it happens three times. First the Parcae spin a thread which surpasses the proverbially long lives of mythical mortals Tithonus and Nestor (v. 14), and the job seems done. Yet Apollo now appears (v. 15) and as he enchants the Parcae, the thread spontaneously surpasses a mortal span (v. 20) – again. Still Apollo encourages them: “may he surpass the length of mortal life” (*uincat mortalīs tempora uitae*, v. 21). But this has now been achieved twice already, and with the same verb (*uincunt... uincunt*, v. 14). Finally, as we have seen, the return to prose sees Lachesis generously allocating long life to Nero (4.2). *Three* times, then, the Parcae assure Nero's longevity: the threefold description of Lachesis' hair is matched by the

triple performance at the loom. This protraction – producing by some way the longest set of verses in *Apocolocyntosis* – is hard to miss, and does more than simply bulk up the praise (*pace* Weinreich (1923) 49). Excess is inscribed at the level of word and phrase as it is in the content. Seneca's praise does not *risk* being too expansive, it *is* abundantly and obviously over-generous: exceptional praise for an exceptional boy. "The work hastens on of its own accord" (*sponte sua festinat opus*, v. 12): like the thread, Seneca's verses spin themselves in a poetical performance of the scene. Whether this is clever or cruel, praise or parody, depends inevitably on the rhetorical-political agenda of the reader. But mockery is not the only reading available.

Given the lack of Senecan hexameters outside *Apocolocyntosis*, we can gain only a crude sense of his tastes and what he does or does not intend to be remarkable. Nevertheless, these verses deserve a more serious reading. Like style, content cannot be dismissed as "hackneyed," *pace* Boatwright (1986: 15 n.20), certainly not in terms of reworking earlier literature. The picture of the spinning Fates (and the rare word *subte(g)mina*, 4.1.5) inevitably recalls Catullus 64.305–83, mediated by Virgil's prophecy of a new Golden Age, begun in *Eclogues* 4 and turned to Augustan panegyric in the *Aeneid*. Where Virgil fantasized about sheep spontaneously turning their fleeces into expensive shades of yellow and red (*Eclogues* 4.44–7), Seneca takes that *automaton* motif and brings it to the mythological sphere: it is the very thread of Nero's life that turns to gold of its own accord – not so much absurd (Merfeld (1999) 64–5) as witty, the sort of repetition with variation taken as normal in "serious" Latin poetry. Meanwhile the scenario, as Apollo beguiles the spinning Parcae, recalls not *Eclogues* 4 but *Georgics* 4, where Clymene delights the nymphs with her song as they spin their *mollia pensa* ("soft wool," *Georgics* 4.348–9). This cursory glance already suggests a complex fusion – an excess, even – of literary resources.

So too the imagery of Nero as Phoebus, at once Apollo and Sun. Seneca marshals well-developed tropes of ruler panegyric, famous not least from Augustan iconography (Bergmann (1998) 99–126 and in this volume; Miller (2009)), but to novel effect. Like Augustus and others, Nero is compared to a sun or star (as he is in *On Clemency* 1.3.3 and 1.8.4, but here with poetry's mythological apparatus). Yet at the same time he is not just associated, but actually fused, with Apollo *citharoedus*, the long-haired, lyre-strumming god of youth, peace, and art: Nero is the *formosissimus* (*Apoc.* 4.2) match for *formosus* Apollo (Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.57). This imagery overload climaxes in the final verses (4.1.30–2):

talis Caesar adest, talem iam Roma Neronem
aspiciet. flagrat nitidus fulgore remisso
uultus et affuso ceruix formosa capillo.

such a Caesar is at hand, such a Nero Rome will soon behold. His shining face burns with gentle glow, and his shapely neck with spreading hair.

Nero has the winning, paradoxical combination of burning astral divinity (the celestial resonance of *fulgore*, "glow," continues the star simile of vv. 25–9) and mild youth (the *fulgor* is *remissus*, "gentle"). But he is Apollo too, as the final vision of his "shapely neck" and "spreading hair" makes clear. Striking language points the conceit. The zeugma

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with *flagrat* strangely makes Nero's neck "burn," a point underlined by *affuso*: this word, never elsewhere used of hair, more usually describes a color or glow "spreading" (*On Anger* 2.1.2; *On Benefits* 4.11.6; *Letters* 11.3). Solar glow and Apolline tresses are mysteriously intertwined in words as in image. Whether Nero's hair really was shoulder-length is beside the point (*pace* Champlin (2003) 279–80): Apollo's hair, symbol of youth (Nisbet and Hubbard (1970) 255) and peace (Maltby (2002) 435), combines in conscious paradox with the rising sun to encapsulate Nero's unique position as the youngest emperor ever to accede, and one who had fought no civil war to achieve it. Nero already outshines his model Augustus; Seneca for his part does not leave Augustan poetry unchallenged. None of this need rule out literary, or political, play – but "oppositional" subversion is not the only way to validate these hexameters' performance.

Conclusion

Menippean satire is a tricky beast, on which no interpretative strait jacket will sit comfortably. *Apocolocyntosis* will always fight, squirm, evade. What I have offered here is one possible reading of Seneca's skit as political script for a new autocracy. Claudius is ejected not only from heaven but from the mechanism of imperial self-legitimation, as Nero is divinely established as rightful and needed monarch. Satire serves its political end: Seneca entertains and instructs not just his teenage master but the Roman elite at large. *Apocolocyntosis* takes us to the heart of the Neronian accession, strips apotheosis down to its essentials, and generates conceptual space for a potential future *diuus*. No mere jesting, this is imperial politics pure: Nero has risen.

FURTHER READING

The bibliography on *Apocolocyntosis* is extensive, much of it short notes debating textual cruxes, the meaning of jokes, and the title. Eden (1984) is the standard Anglophone text and commentary; Griffin (1976) remains definitive on Seneca seen whole (129–33 on *Apoc.*). Critical reviews of earlier work are provided by Coffey (1961) and Motto and Clark (1989) 40–5, 242–8. Lana and Malaspina (2005) is awkward but comprehensive, and can be searched online at www.senecana.it. Substantial English-language contributions since Eden: Boatwright (1986) on *Apoc.* 4.1, Nauta (1987) and Versnel (1993b) on Saturnalia (with Versnel (1993a) 113–227 for the broader context); Rudich (1987) and (1997) 36–43 on *Apocolocyntosis* as palinode; Leach (1989) and Robinson (2005) on subversion; Riikonen (1987) and Relihan (1993) 75–90 on Menippean satire; Braund (1993) and Braund and James (1998) on political denigration; O'Gorman (2005) on quotation; Cole (2006) on apotheosis; Nussbaum (2009) on Stoic humor; Paschalis (2009b) on epic allusion; Damon (2010) on historiography. For ancient reception, see section headed "Who's Laughing Anyway?" above; Courtney (2004).

German debate has concentrated on political meaning. Earlier work is summarized in Bringmann (1985). Weinreich's (1923) commentary remains valuable; Lund (1994) is focused on linguistic and textual problems. Wolf's (1986) argument that an ironic Seneca damns Augustus and Principate alike is spectacularly demolished by Jakobi (1988). Merfeld (1999) 49–70 reads *Apoc.* 4 as paraenetic parody; for English summary and critique, see Dewar (2003). Other recent contributions include Schmitzer (2000), Dobesch (2002) and Heil (2006).

Some oddities have appeared in Italian: Rodríguez-Almeida (1996a) and (1996b) argues badly for Flavian dating; Gamba (2000) 11–45 believes Seneca was Christian. The commentary of

Russo (1985), however, is very useful, and the slim Vannini (2008) helpful for recent bibliography; Roncali (1990) is the standard Latin text for many continental scholars.

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