

Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*: Presentation of Claudius

Questions to consider How is Claudius presented? Fair to Claudius?

● a fool

Sen. *Apoc.* 1.1. “fatuum”; 7.1 “tu desine fatuari”; 7.3; 8.3

Suet. *Cl.* 3 “if she [Claudius’ mother] ever accused anyone of stupidity, would exclaim: ‘He is a bigger fool even than my son Claudius!’”

Suet. *Cl.* 38 “Instead of keeping quiet about his stupidity, Claudius explained, in a few short speeches, that it had been a mere mask assumed for the benefit of Caligula, and that he owed both life and throne to it. Nobody, however, believed him, and soon a book was published entitled *The Fool’s Rise to Power*; the thesis being that no one would act the fool unless he were a fool already.” (contra Cassius Dio 60.2.4-6 [“.... From a child he had been reared a constant prey to illness and great terror, and for that reason had feigned a stupidity greater than was really the case (a fact that he himself admitted in the senate)”])

Suet. *Cl.* 39 “Claudius’s scatter-brainedness and shortsightedness- or if you prefer the Greek terms, his *meteoris* and *ablepsia*- were truly remarkable. After executing Messaline, he went in to dinner, and presently asked: ‘Why is her ladyship not here? On several occasions he sent for men to give him advice or throw dice with him; and when they did not appear, followed this up with a reproachful message calling them slugabeds- quite unaware that he had just sentenced them to death.’”

Cassius Dio 60.2.1 “In mental ability he was by no means inferior, as his faculties had been in constant training (in fact, he had actually written some historical treatises)”

Tac. *Annals* 13.3 (p. 285, tr. Grant) funeral “On the day of the funeral the emperor pronounced his predecessor’s praises. While he recounted the consulships and Triumphs of the dead man’s ancestors, he and his audience were serious.... But when Nero began to talk of his stepfather’s foresight and wisdom, nobody could help laughing.”

● physically handicapped

continual ill-health suggested by Sen. *Apoc.* 3.1 “torqueri”; “tam diu cruciatus”; “anima luctatur”

shambling gait e.g. Sen. *Apoc.* 1.2 “non passibus aequis”; Sen. *Apoc.* 5.2 “pedem dextrum trahere”

trembling, including shaking head (Sen. *Apoc.* 5.2; 7.1) and hand (Sen. *Apoc.* 6.1); Sen. *Apoc.* 6.1 Goddess Fever accompanies him- “quae cum illo tot annis uixi” [Eden ad loc. suggests this implies “that he was a chronic sufferer from malarial fever, one of whose symptoms, shivering and shaking, would have been indistinguishable from his habitual trembling”]

speech defect: Sen. *Apoc.* 4.2; 5.2 “perturbato sono et uoce confusa”; 5.3; 6.2 “quanto potest murmure irascitur. quid diceret nemo intellegebat”; 7.2; 7.4 “haec uisus est dicere”; 11.3; 14.2 Sen. *Apoc.* 5.3 Hercules initially thinks he has met another monster: “nouī generis faciem, insolitum incessum, uocem nullius terrestris animalis sed qualis esse marinis beluis solet, raucam et implicatam”

Sen. *Apoc.* 11.3 “uidete corpus eius dis iratis natum”

Suet. *Cl.* 2 “Nearly the whole of his childhood and youth was so troubled by various diseases that he grew dull-witted and had little physical strength; and on reaching the age at which he should have won a magistracy or chosen a private career, was considered by his family incapable of doing either.”

Suet. *Cl.* 3 “Claudius’ mother often called him ‘a monster: a man whom Mother Nature had begun to work upon but then flung aside’”

Suet. *Cl.* 30 “Claudius had a certain dignity of presence, which showed to best advantage when

he happened to be standing or seated and expressing no emotion. This was because, though tall, well-built, handsome, with a fine head of white hair and a firm neck, he stumbled as he walked owing to the weakness of his knees; and because, if excited either by play or serious business, he had several disagreeable traits. These included an uncontrollable laugh, a horrible habit, under the stress of anger, of slobbering at the mouth and running at the nose, a stammer, and a persistent nervous tic- which grew so bad under emotional stress that his head would toss from side to side.”

Cassius Dio 60.2.1-2 “In mental ability he was by no means inferior ... but he was sickly in body, so that his head and hands shook slightly. Because of this his voice was also faltering, and he did not himself read all the measures that he introduced to the senate, but would give them to the quaestor to read, though at first, at least, he was generally present.”

- **despotic**

e.g. Sen. *Apoc.* 1.1 “me liberum factum”; “regem”; 12.1 “populus Romanus ambulabat tamquam liber”

Sen. *Apoc.* 6.1 (Rome’s enemy) “itaque quod Gallum facere oportebat, Romam cepit” - cf 5.4 truer to say “There I sacked the city and destroyed the people”

(fair? nb Nero speech to senate shows that senate felt they didn’t have enough power; tensions from start when senate didn’t want him)

- **ruled by others** (freedmen esp. Narcissus and Pallas; wives)

Sen. *Apoc.* 6.2 “putares omnes illius esse liberos: adeo illum nemo curabat”

Suet. *Cl.* 28 “But his firmest devotion was reserved for Narcissus, his secretary, and Pallas, his treasurer, whom he encouraged the Senate to honour with large gifts of money and the insignia of quaestors and praetors as well.”

Suet. *Cl.* 29 “As I mentioned above, Claudius fell so deeply under the influence of these freedmen and wives that he seemed to be their servant rather than their emperor; and distributed titles, army commands, indulgences or punishments according to their wishes, however capricious.”

Cassius Dio 60.2.4-6 “It was not these infirmities, however, that caused the deterioration in Claudius so much as it was the freedmen and the women with whom he associated; for he, more conspicuously than any of his peers, was ruled by slaves and by women. From a child he had been reared a constant prey to illness and great terror, and for that reason had feigned a stupidity greater than was really the case (a fact that he himself admitted in the senate); and he had lived for a long time with his grandmother Livia and for another long period with his mother Antonia and with the freedmen, and moreover he had many amours with women. Hence he acquired none of the qualities befitting a freedman, but, though a ruler of all the Romans and their subjects, had become himself a slave. The would take advantage of him particularly when he was inclined to drink or to sexual intercourse, since he applied himself to both these vices insatiably and when so employed was exceedingly easy to master. Moreover, he was afflicted by cowardice, which so often overpowered him that he could not reason out anything as he ought.”

Cassius Dio 60.8.4-6; 60.14.1-4; 60.18.4; 60.29.3; 60.30.6;

Cassius Dio 60.19.1 Aulus Plautius campaigned in Britain; 2-3 soldiers reluctant to go: delayed until Narcissus came to persuade them- 3 “Then they became much angrier at this and would not allow Narcissus to say a word, but suddenly shouted with one accord the well-known cry, “Io Saturnalia” (for at the festival of Saturn the slaves don their masters’ dress and hold festival), and at once right willingly followed Plautius.”

nb in the *Apoc.*, Claudian ends up being a secretary to a freedman..

- **poor general**

Sen. *Apoc.* 12.3

(Claudian lacked a glorious military record; played no personal part in operations in East. Parthians getting upper hand; accusations of cowardice backed up by Dio 60.2.4-6; but British campaign quite successful)

Suet. *Cl.* 17 "Claudius's sole campaign was of no great importance. The Senate had already voted him triumphal regalia, but he thought it beneath his dignity to accept these, and decided that Britain was the country where a real triumph could be most readily earned ... He had fought no battles and suffered no casualties, but reduced a large part of the island to submission."

Tac. *Annals* 13.3 (p285, tr. Grant) funeral "On the day of the funeral the emperor pronounced his predecessor's praises. While he recounted the consulships and Triumphs of the dead man's ancestors, he and his audience were serious. References to Claudius' literary accomplishments too, and to the absence of disasters in the field during his reign, were favourably received."

- **devaluer of citizenship:**

Sen. *Apoc.* 3.3 Clotho was hoping to prolong his life "dum hoc pauculos qui supersunt ciuitate donaret (constituerat enim omnes Graecos, Gallos, Hispanos, Britannos togatos uidere)"; 9.4 (Diespiter) "uendere ciuitatulas solebat"

Cassius Dio 60.17.5 "A great many other persons unworthy of citizenship were also deprived of it, whereas he granted citizenship to others quite indiscriminately, sometimes to individuals and sometimes to whole groups. For inasmuch as Romans had the advantage over foreigners in practically all respects, many sought the franchise by personal application to the emperor, and many bought it from Messalina and the imperial freedmen. For this reason, though the privilege was at first sold only for large sums, it later became so cheapened by the facility with which it could be obtained that it came to be a common saying, that a man could become a citizen by giving the right person some bits of broken glass."

(doesn't tie in with known facts: no particular significant increase: see Eden appendix)

NB concern for keeping native Romans in power Suet. *Cl.* 24 "At the beginning of his reign Claudius undertook to create no new senator unless he could prove that his ancestors had been Roman citizens for five generations; presently, however, he ennobled the son of a freedman on the sole condition that he should get himself adopted by a knight"; Suet. *Cl.* 25 "It now became illegal for foreigners to adopt the names of Roman families, and any who usurped the rights of Roman citizens were executed on the slopes of the Esquiline Hill."

- **obsessed with legal affairs/hinderer of justice**

Sen. *Apoc.* 7.4-5 "...cum causidicos audirem diem et noctem..."; "12.2 "Agatho et pauci causidici plorabant, sed plane ex animo. iurisconsulti e tenebris procedebant, pallidi, graciles, uix animam habentes, tamquam qui tum maxime reuiuiscerent" (Eden: "By arrogating judicial functions to himself, Claudius had encouraged the rapacity of barristers, who by dishonesty and collusion made flagrantly unlawful profits."; lex Cincia of 204BC which forbade payment for speaking was ignored- indeed Claudius okayed it by having upper limit of 10,000 sesterces on fees (Tac. *Ann.* 11.5-7). In first year of Nero's reign fees were regulated (Suet. Nero 17) and out-of-court bargaining made illegal (Tac. *Ann.* 13.5.1))

10.4 Augustus accuses Claudius of sentencing to death without hearing evidence

12.3.19ff "deflete uirum, quo non alius / potuit citius discere causas, / una tantum parte audita, / saepe neutra. quis nunc iudex / toto lites audiet anno? / tibi iam cedet sede relictas / qui dat populo iura silenti, / Cretaea tenens oppida centum. / caedite maestis pectora palis / o causidici, uenale genus"

arbitrary executioner

habit of executing: Sen. *Apoc.* 6.2 “ille autem Febrim duci iubebat. illo gestu solutae manus, ad ad hoc unum satis firmæ, quo decollare homines solebat, iusserat illi collum praecidi.”; 11; 14

14.3 only one side of Claudius’ case heard: not unprecedented

Suet. *Cl.* 29 “Suffice it to record that he executed his father-in-law Appius Silanus; Julia, daughter of Tiberius’s son Drusus; and Julia, daughter of his own brother Germanicus- all on unsupported charges and without the right to plead in self-defence.”

Suet. *Cl.* 12 “He recalled no exile from banishment without Senatorial permission, and when wishing to bring the Guard’s Commander and some colonels into the House, or to have the judicial decisions of his provincial agents ratified, would ask the Senate for these privileges as a favour; and actually approached the Consuls for leave to hold fairs on his private estates. Often he sat on the Advisory Council during trials in magistrates’ courts”

Suet. *Cl.* 14 “During these terms of office and, indeed, at all times, Claudius was a most conscientious judge: sitting in court even on his own birthday and those of his family, sometimes actually on ancient popular holidays or days of ill-omen. Instead of always observing the letter of the law, he let himself be guided by his sense of equity, and when he thought the punishments prescribed were either too lenient or too severe, changed them accordingly. Thus, should plaintiffs have lost their cases in a lower court by demanding more damages than the law sanctioned, he allowed them to modify the plea and ordered a re-trial. But if anyone were found guilty of some really shocking crime, Claudius condemned him to the wild beasts.”

Suet. *Cl.* 15 “However, his behaviour in Court varied unpredictably: sometimes he was wise and prudent, sometimes thoughtless and hasty, sometimes downright foolish and apparently out of his senses.”

Suet. *Cl.* 23 “Until this reign there had been two terms in the Law Courts, the summer and the winter; Claudius prolonged the summer term into the autumn, and abolished the winter one altogether.”

Cassius Dio 60.4.2-4 “Of the persons in prison- and a very large number were thus confined- he liberated those who had been put there for *maiestas* and similar charges, but punished those who were guilty of actual wrong-doing. For he investigated all the cases very carefully, in order that those who had committed crimes should not be released along with those who had been falsely accused, nor the latter, on the other hand, perish with the former. Almost every day, either in company with the whole senate or alone, he would sit on a tribunal trying cases, usually in the Forum, but sometimes elsewhere; for he renewed the practice of having advisers sit with him, a practice that had been abandoned from the time that Tiberius withdrew to his island. He also frequently joined the consuls and the praetors, especially those who had the oversight of the finances, in their investigations, and very few, indeed, were the cases that he turned over to the other courts”

Cassius Dio 60.28.6 “As the number of law-suits was now beyond all reckoning and those who expected to lose their cases would no longer put in an appearance, he issued a proclamation announcing that he would decide the cases against them by a given day even in their absence; and he strictly enforced this rule.”

Tac. *Annals* 11.5 (p233, tr. Grant) “For the emperor’s absorption of all judicial and magisterial functions had opened up extensive opportunities for illicit gain”

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.”

- **fond of dice**

12.3.29f. mourn “uosque in primis qui concusso / magna parastis lucra fritillo”; 14; 15

Suet. *Cl.* 33 “So fervent was his devotion to dice that he published a book on the subject, and used to play, while out driving, on a special board fitted to his carriage which kept the dice from rolling off capriciously.”

- **fond of quoting Greek**

Sen. *Apoc.* 5.4 Claudius quotes Hom *Od.* 9.39

cf. Suet. *Cl.* 42 “Claudius also studied Greek with great application, and took every opportunity of professing his love for this language, which he declared to be the finest of all..... Claudius used to quote Homer from the tribunal...”; cf. Cassius Dio 60.16.8 (remarks in Greek)

Nb remember different images of Claudian at different times: rehabilitated under Vespasian (Levick p190); Levick chapter on aftermath deals generally on reception.