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# Hypocrisy in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* and *De Clementia*

by Aaron Getman-Pickering

IN 55 CE, the stoic philosopher, Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Seneca the Younger), wrote a political satire called the *Apocolocyntosis*, also known as the Pumpkinification of the Divine Claudius. In the story of the *Apocolocyntosis*, Seneca fictitiously depicts the death of the Emperor Claudius and his attempt to join the gods (which is denied), after which he is then sent to the underworld. Upon his arrival, Claudius is met by the great exaltation, "The lost is found, O let us rejoice together!"<sup>1</sup> Mistakenly believing the chanting men and women are welcoming him, he replies, "Friends everywhere, on my word! How came you all here?" To this Pede Pompeius answers, "What, cruel man? How came we here? Who but you sent us, you, the murderer of all the friends that ever you had? To court with you! I'll show you where their lordships sit."<sup>2</sup> The 'supposed'<sup>3</sup> victims of Claudius's regime put him on trial for the deaths he caused during his life: 35 senators, 221 Roman knights, and "others as the sands of the sea-shore for multitude. Claudius finds no counsel."<sup>4</sup> Found guilty, Claudius was confined to his own Sisyphean task: an eternity playing dice in a box with no bottom.

*De Clementia* was (by scholarly assumption) written by Seneca within a year of the *Apocolocyntosis*,<sup>5</sup> around 55 or 56 CE. It depicts a different, more serious vein of intellectual thought: an instruction on the relation between a good ruler and his subjects. In *De Clementia*,

Seneca writes, "no one resorts to the exaction of punishment until he has exhausted all means of correction." The power of clemency was one that was seen as a stoic virtue. Had Seneca already "exhausted" all means of correction in his dealings with the now dead Claudius? Was it Stoic--or even proper layman etiquette--to personally besmirch a ruler under whom Rome had flourished? I will argue that it was not, and that Seneca should be held to his own standards. This essay will delineate his motivations in writing the *Apocolocyntosis* and why it stands as a stark contradiction to his more philosophical writings, mainly *De Clementia* (On Clemency).

Scholars have debated the discrepancy between Seneca's public and private lives through the dichotomy of Stoicism and Epicureanism. In his *vita activa*, or public life, Seneca is known for preaching stoic virtues: wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation. However, he is equally well-known for living in multiple homes, amassing great wealth, and living a lavish lifestyle, a stark contradiction to the simple disciplined Stoic lifestyle he prescribed. His philosophical teachings on clemency are irreconcilable with the public shaming of Claudius seen in the *Apocolocyntosis*.

Seneca's ascension into Roman political life began in the year 33 CE when he was elected to the quaestorship under the rule of Emperor Tiberius. "Whether he held any government posts prior to this date cannot be ascertained."<sup>7</sup> His interactions with the Emperor Claudius

1 Seneca, Ball, trans., *Apocolocyntosis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1902), 13.

2 Ibid.

3 There is no historical confirmation of Seneca's count.

4 Ibid., 14.

5 Anna Lydia Motto, *Seneca*, (New York: Twayne, 1973), 20.

6 Seneca, Basore, trans., *De Clementia* (London: Heinemann, 1928), 14.2.

7 Motto, 18.

began in the early years of his reign when Seneca “held a socially prominent position in the court (of Claudius),” having built a reputation for himself as a lawyer of brilliant oratory abilities.<sup>8</sup> Messalina, the third wife of Claudius, made plans to further her own power by unjustly accusing Seneca of relations with her sister, Julia Livilla, of whom Messalina was immensely jealous. Despite public understanding that the rumor was completely unfounded, Julia was put to death, and Seneca was brought to stand in front of the senate where Messalina and Claudius held ultimate influence. He was sentenced to exile in Corsica as well as forced to forfeit an estimated half of his property.<sup>9</sup> It should be clear under these circumstances alone why Seneca felt animosity towards the emperor, and why, after eight years in exile, he would write the *Apocolocyntosis* upon his return to Rome.

During his time in exile, Seneca’s work evolved, as did his theories in Stoic thought. Most famously, he wrote three works on mourning known as Seneca’s Consolations: *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, *De Consolatione ad Polybium*, and *De Consolatione ad Helviam*, all of which were written between 40–45 CE. In the *Ad Polybium*, a work overtly written to console Polybius on the death of his brother, Seneca cajoles the emperor Claudius, begging for return from exile. To praise the very man who was responsible for his exile must have been compromising for Seneca, but it also signaled that he was ready to return to the public sphere at any cost. Praising the very man who orchestrated his exile, he states to the mourning Polybius:

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Lift yourself up, and every time that tears well up in your eyes, fix these upon Caesar [Claudius]; at the sight of the exceeding greatness and splendor of his divinity they will be dried; his brilliance will dazzle them so that they will be able to see nothing else... And, so great is his kindness; so great is his gracious favor towards all followers, I do not doubt that he has already covered over this wound of yours with many balms, that he has already supplied many things to stay your sorrow.<sup>10</sup>

However, even the flattery and subservience to the emperor was futile, as Seneca would spend another five years in exile until Claudius died. Agrippina, Claudius’s third wife and mother of Nero, was the one responsible for Seneca’s recall. It was said that she poisoned her husband

Claudius in order to see her son rise to the throne. In the year 54 CE, Seneca was recalled at the age of fifty-three to become the advisor for the now 18-year-old Nero.<sup>11</sup>

The first (and often tacit) assumption of the *Apocolocyntosis* is that it was a piece of political propaganda commissioned by the ambitious Agrippina, which would make sense as she was, after all, the one responsible for Seneca’s recall from exile. However, the interpersonal dynamics are much more convoluted and the possible motives for its creation are calculatedly nuanced. It is crucial for us to understand these subtleties in order to see why it

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Seneca, *Ad Polybium*, 12.1, quoted in Marion Altman, “Ruler Cult in Seneca” *Classical Philology* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1938):198-204, 201.

<sup>11</sup> Motto, 23.

stands in contradiction. If it were in fact the sole working of Agrippina, it might clear Seneca of the culpability that this essay proves he deserves. One theory is that the piece was written as social commentary, an indictment on the system of deification of emperors.<sup>12</sup>

This process was known as apotheosis, whereupon, as a sign of the utmost reverence, emperors received their own cult as well as priesthoods and festivals. In this line of thought, Seneca was writing this in order to remind the public that the rite of apotheosis was sacred and should be reserved for only the strongest of rulers.

However, in the text, Seneca perpetrates the system of deification by taking it further, ascribing godly attributes to Nero while he was still alive: "So in his glory shall Rome behold Nero. Thus do his radiant features gleam with gentle effulgence, graced by the flowing locks that fall encircling his shoulders. Thus Apollo"<sup>13</sup> Other theories suggest that it may have been written "as a masterly attack upon her [Agrippina], as the author of Claudius's consecration."<sup>14</sup> This argument too is erroneous for the sole reason that there is no direct mention or allusion to her in the text. Seneca owed his recall from exile to Agrippina, and would only come in conflict with her when she became suspect in homicidal plans concerning other imperial relatives.<sup>15</sup> The only logical motive was that Sen-

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12 Altman, 200.

13 Seneca, Ball, trans., *Apocolocyntosis*, 4.1.

14 Jocelyn M.C. Toynbee, "Nero Artifex: The Apocolocyntosis Reconsidered," *The Classical Quarterly* 36, no. ¾ (1942): 85.

15 Seneca surely understood that his own recall was in part due to the death of Claudius by the hands of Agrippina. This presents another contradiction with his later self: first accepting then despis-

eca wrote the piece in order to delegitimize the legacy of Claudius, the man who arranged his eight lonely years in Corsica. In this sense, it is important that Seneca was well aware of the impact his writing would have, and therefore that we understand this intent.

It is difficult to make an objective statement to the administrative competence of an emperor, given the vast array of, sometimes misleading, factors that make up the

image. Nonetheless, experts of Roman rule have stated without reservation that Claudius's rule was efficient—more than Caligula before him and Nero after him.

Historian Alan Perly Ball believes that he "is entitled to far better representation than he ever got."<sup>17</sup> Despite physical limitations that may be attributed to cerebral palsy, he managed to, among other things, expand the borders of the Empire into Britain, contribute greatly to public works, and introduce a meritocratic system in Roman government.<sup>18</sup> It is important to understand Claudius for what he was as to better ascertain what he was not, mainly the libelous description assigned to him by Seneca.

In the *Apocolocyntosis*, Seneca brutalizes the image of Claudius. In Greco-Roman politics, the ethos of a sound body and a sound mind were inexorably linked, where the beneficent ruler is physically strong, and vice versa.<sup>19</sup> Seneca uses imagery of Claudius's physical lim-

ing of political puppetry.

16 Barbara Levick *Claudius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 191.

17 Seneca, Ball, trans., *Apocolocyntosis*, 3.

18 Levick, 14-15.

19 Susanna Morton Braund and Paula James, "Quasi Homo: Distortion and Contortion in Seneca's Apocolocyntosis," *Arethusa* 31.

tations, mainly his stutter and limp leg, to justify his ineptitude and delegitimize his rule. Upon arriving in heaven, Hercules, the conqueror of the famed twelve tasks, “was a good deal disturbed, even though he was one who didn’t fear any sort of monsters. When he beheld the aspect of this unknown specimen [Claudius], its extraordinary gait, its voice belonging to no earthly creature but more like the monsters of the deep, hoarse and inarticulate, he thought that a thirteenth labor had come to him.”<sup>20</sup> It is increasingly clear that this piece is meant not only to delegitimize his rule, but also to defile his image and ruin him in the public eye.

Seneca states explicitly in *De Clementia* that “clemency means restraining the mind from vengeance when it has the power to take it.”<sup>21</sup> It is “the exercise of self-restraint in the punishment of opponents in a situation where the ruler has absolute power and could exact the ultimate revenge if he chose.”<sup>22</sup> In *Apocolocyntosis*, Seneca contradicts this very principle, berating Claudius for his ineptitudes, saying through the voice of Janus, “it was once a great thing to be made a god, but now you have made the distinction a farce [in reference to Claudius’s deification].”<sup>23</sup> Again, in speaking through Augustus—an Emperor who Seneca felt worthy of deification—he wages an attack on Claudius: “Look at his body, born when the Gods were angry. And finally if he can say three consecutive words together, he can have me as a slave. Who will worship this God? Who will believe in him? As long as you made such Gods as he, nobody will believe that you are Gods yourself.”<sup>24</sup> These attacks are *ad hominem* in that they do not directly relate to his political competen-

cy, but what were inherited physical attributes. In a modern world they would be unwarranted, but, as mentioned above, Seneca and the other Romans understood that the two went hand in hand. The portrayal of Claudius as bestial and subhuman is repeated again and again, forming the association that weak body entails weak rule, and that in the realm of godliness, Claudius is not only unwelcome but also laughable. At the same time, Seneca also tells his mentee that “the quality of mercy, then, as I was saying, is indeed for *all men* in accordance with nature...for greatness of the soul is a virtue that is seemly for every human being, even for him who is the lowliest of the lowly.”<sup>25</sup> While desecrating the image and legacy of Claudius in the *Apocolocyntosis*, he preached in his philosophical works the Stoic virtues of mercy, clemency, and forgiveness for those who have harmed you. Seneca acknowledges “the case in which [one] is personally concerned, it is more difficult...to act with moderation [then] when he acts under the impulse of actual pain.”<sup>26</sup> For Seneca, it must have been difficult not to want to retaliate against the man who punished him so severely. By failing to practice what he preached, however, Seneca is by definition a hypocrite. He does not act in accordance with *clementia*, but rather with its opposite, *crudelitas*.

One question that should be addressed is whether the two writings are irreconcilable. In other words, is it necessarily a contradiction of ideology for Seneca to have written these two pieces one after another? After all, these virtues were thought to be unattainable for all except the Stoic Sage, who was equal to the gods.<sup>27</sup> While this may have been true, Seneca was a philosopher who spent his

no. 3 (1998): 289.

<sup>20</sup> Seneca, Ball, trans., *Apocolocyntosis*, 5.1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.3.

<sup>22</sup> Braund, and James, 292.

<sup>23</sup> Seneca, Ball, trans., *Apocolocyntosis*, 9.2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.1.

<sup>25</sup> Seneca, Basore, trans., *De Clementia*, 5.1. It is vital to understand that in *De Clementia*, Seneca is writing to Emperor Nero, who succeeded Claudius. Each of Seneca’s words should be understood in this context, as advice to an autocratic ruler.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.1.

<sup>27</sup> Motto, 59.

entire life in pursuit of this ideal. Clemency as a Stoic virtue can, and in this case should, be understood as anyone with power to control the fortunes of others. If in no way else, Seneca surely possessed power within the Roman state, both politically and socially. While the game of politics certainly distorted the vision Seneca had, he was aware that when he returned from exile that it would be impossible to do so without complications of public life. As a philosopher, Seneca turned Stoicism into a Roman creed that criticized the abuses of power, wealth, anger, and corruption.<sup>28</sup> After all his criticism, and prescriptive remedies, the irony of his attack on Claudius in the *Apocolocyntosis* is too blatant to ignore.

In another of his works, *De Ira*, Seneca states that the angry man is “devoid of self-control, regardless of decorum, forgetful of kinship, obstinately engrossed in whatever it begins to do, [and] deaf to reason and advice.”<sup>29</sup> Almost as if describing himself, Seneca takes on all of these characterizations, becoming painfully “awkward at perceiving what is true and just, and like a falling rock which breaks itself to pieces upon the very thing which it crushes.”<sup>30</sup> *De Clementia* and the *Apocolocyntosis* stand in marked contradiction to one another; they show just another way in which Seneca lived in two worlds—worlds that were incongruous. *De Clementia* is a rich philosophical work that was based on deep and considered thought on how power should be wielded. *Apocolocyntosis* is a satire written out of anger and the need for vengeance disguised as an impartial philosophic treatise.

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28 Brendan D. Nagle, *The Roman World Sources and Interpretation* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2005) 192.

29 Seneca, Stewart, trans., *De Ira* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1889) 1.1.

30 *Ibid.*