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Final Paper

A Departure from the Desire for Divinity

Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* is best known for providing a witty and brutal takedown of his former banisher Claudius—a work of revenge on par in epic severity with the fulfillment of “*Carthago delenda est*”. Yet Seneca the great philosopher and tutor of the new emperor does not solely content himself with his personal aims but further seeks to guide his impressionable young pupil. In addition to serving to humiliate the subject, Claudius’ journey to heaven also provides an excuse to examine the realm of the gods. By offering an inside look at heaven’s happenings, it shines a light on the less acknowledged ineptitude and shortcomings of the gods themselves. Not content to settle on merely settling a grudge, through his intentional characterizations and multifaceted comments Seneca also crafts a subtle advisory statement to Nero regarding the insignificance of divine status compared to true achievements.

Nero and Seneca possess competing notions of what a god should be in actuality and reputation. Seneca adheres to the stoic doctrine, meaning he considers the universe “to be a living being, unlimited in power, absolute in will, possessing the highest reason, acting with moral purpose… God and the universe are one” (Burton, 1909, p. 357). Individuals are not gods, but should an individual wish to act as one, this would be the only divinity worth mimicking. Nero looks to more well-known figures for inspiration of what it means to be divine. Instead of relying on virtue, reason, and policy, as Seneca would have him do, he believes that “Singing and racing chariots would raise him to the gods” (Champlin, 2003, p.112). Having spent much time with Nero already, Seneca likely anticipated Nero’s infatuations with achieving the godly à la Apollo, and should the *Apocolocyntosis* have been written in 54 CE it may serve as an attempt to nip this in the bud.

This time period was the beginning of the end of divine status carrying any distinction for achievement or character. “The total number of persons who were raised to the rank of Divi during the five centuries from Julius Caesar to Valentinian III was seventy-four” (Burton, 1912, p.83), and as this became a formality rather than distinction “wisdom and morality in the highest sense hardly entered into [the average Roman’s] notion of a god at all” (p.87). Seneca, observing the decline of the reputation and expectation of a god, would prefer Nero not to obsess over this and instead to emulate a leader possessing virtue. Being a god came to be the equivalent of a consul: a cool title bearing little respect or sense of duty. Seneca wished for Nero to understand this and strive for greater things of substance and virtue to bolster his name, and he wrote the *Apocolocyntosis* partially to communicate this.

An underlying theme of the *Apocolocyntosis* is that while the gods possess the appearance of greatness, this quickly gives way to their ineptitude, faults, and lack of owed respect. By highlighting such numerous shortcomings Seneca seeks to demonstrate that Nero should reevaluate his path to renown. The first example of this is one that would hit especially close to home for Nero as it pertains to his beloved Apollo: “Phoebus had already drawn in the arc of his light with a shorter path” (*Apocolocyntosis*, 2.4). The great Apollo serves as no more than a symbolic tool in notably bad poetry. Rather than rising to mind for his achievements, he is a glorified clock. This is contrasted with a closely-following pronouncement of Apollo himself in regards to Nero’s destiny: “Such a Caesar is at hand” (4.1). Apollo has spent the previous few lines issuing Nero’s praises and telling of his impending greatness, and instead of referencing a god in conjunction with this, he chooses a distinctive mortal as the pinnacle of such great accomplishment. While both famous Caesars later went on to become gods, it is their mortal achievements that make them truly stand out in history and earned them their respect. By having the idol of Nero and the being whose advice he is most likely to take to heart speak these words, Seneca hopes to drive home the message to Nero.

The next several books are littered with scenes that depict the divine not as inspirational but cautionary. Book six features divine “Hercules, who was not exactly shrewd” (6.1), a description that blatantly calls him out and demonstrates that the gods are not as respected as Nero may think. Fever then enters only to insist in an obnoxiously whiny tone that Hercules should listen to her (“I am telling you… I am telling you… I give you my pledge” (6.1)) in yet another illustration of the gods not as the proud, controlling beings Nero wishes to emulate but instead as reeking of desperation. Falling into the role of Apollo will not bring Nero the power or respect he seeks, yet in Seneca’s mind being a just Caesar might.

Time and time again Seneca writes of the famous shortcomings of the gods. The subject “he” of the quote “Jupiter whom, as far as he could, he convicted of incest” (8.1) is technically Claudius in the text, but this could just as easily have been replaced with Seneca. Seneca is the one who reminds the reader (and Nero) of this through this outright statement that serves as one of the sole descriptors of Jupiter in the text. As was the case with Hercules, the immediate description of the divine Janus is one of incompetence: “a consul for the afternoon, a fellow with simultaneous foresight and hindsight—as far as his own street goes” (9.2). And not to be overshone, or perhaps more aptly under-shone, divine Diespiter is no more than “a consul elect, a small-time moneylender” (9.4). As if being a mere moneylender was not lowly enough, he is diminished to further insignificance via the adjective “small-time”. And with this description also comes the connotation of an underhanded man lacking morality and virtue. Such a person is the antithesis of he whom both Seneca and Nero want the latter to be. Through these examples listed among others, Seneca attempts to show Nero that they want the same thing and also to make him question himself. Is this truly the “esteemed” company Nero seeks? Is this how the proud and ambitious Nero wants to be remembered? Seneca, quite knowledgeable of Nero’s vanity, knows just the chords to strike.

Yet just when it seems that no character in the *Apocolocyntosis* will escape denouncement, Augustus interrupts the conversation and incompetence. How fitting is it that Augustus is the one whose motion dashes Claudius’ hopes. For not only does this serve to embarrass Claudius by snapping the Julian connection he had tried to weave for the sake of legitimacy, but it adds a new dimension to the attempted persuasion of Nero. Apollo was not the only one held on a pedestal by Nero, for “there was another great historical figure whom Nero did imitate throughout his reign, closely and creatively… He proclaimed clearly at the beginning of his reign that he would rule according to the example of Augustus” (Champlin, 2003, p.139). Therefore, however Seneca chooses to proceed will have extra weight to it.

Augustus opens: “’*ego’ inquit ‘p.c., vos testes habeo, ex quo deus factus sum, nullum me verbum fecisse’”* (*Apocolocyntosis*, 10.1). Augustus’ first line depicts an individual much different than the one who was victorious at Actium or who transformed Rome. No longer the active mortal ever-expanding his resumé, he sits on Olympus in silence either from lack of motivation, ability, or both. The contrast is further built as he continues to speak, asking “Was it to this end that I secured peace by land and sea? Was it for this that I checked the civil wars? Was it for this that I gave the city of Rome a foundation of laws, and an embellishment of public works, so that--?” (10.2). Once again there is a difference between the subject meant for the sake of the story and the subject filled in via another reading of it. Augustus emphasizes his mortal triumphs, bringing attention to their excellence and all he has done. His impotence as a god becomes even more apparent via the comparison, and it can be construed that these questions are him wondering whether it was for divinity that he had done all this—because divinity just doesn’t compare to the greatness he felt as a powerful and virtuous emperor. Augustus, lost for words of his own, then fills in the blank with the words from a mortal man, Messala Corvinus: “My power shames me” (10.2). Such a declaration could be read as his disenchantment with his status as a god. This additionally could twist the meaning initially intended by the phrase to act ironically as its opposite, as Seneca often does with famous quotes throughout the text. Rather than referring to the presence of supreme power he refers to the absence of anything of this sort. He is shamed not by his great power as a god but by his newfound lack of power that accompanied giving up his mortal persona. It is his mortal activities that he holds in high regard and which he wants to exist as his memory; he gains nothing internally from being a god.

Nevertheless, his wish is granted as “members stepped out to support this proposal” (11.6). The gods chose to abide by the words of Augustus due to the rational case he made calling upon justice and due to their admiration of him following his enumeration of his mortal accomplishments. It is in this way that Nero should choose to emulate Augustus—not in the respect that he became divine but in the respect that he was a rational, virtuous, ever-improving leader on Earth, whom others looked up to for his great deeds rather than his status. This trick of attributing favorable viewpoints and customs to Augustus is a continuation of this same tactic employed in Seneca’s *De Clementia*. Wishing for Nero to adopt a policy of clementia, Seneca both explicitly states that this is what Augustus would do and also provides many examples of Augustus doing just this to drive the point home.

A parallel is drawn in the *Apocolocyntosis* as Seneca has Augustus seem to lament his divine status, suggesting it is not worth pursuing, and then provides examples of his true accomplishments through which he built his venerable life. In the *De Clementia* Seneca argued for Nero to embrace the idea of clementia, virtue, and reason as he crafts his style of ruling. He argued for the choice that is mild and less flashy but nonetheless more demonstrative of greatness. In the *De Clementia* this meant choosing clementia and the unspoken authority that came from sparing someone rather than issuing harsh punishments just because one can. In this context it means choosing to be a virtuous emperor who makes his name by gradually improving the empire rather than just dressing and acting as a god and expecting the respect to come with this.

In the *De Clementia* there was also an air that Nero should strive to be like Augustus, but then do him one better. Seneca states, “No one will venture to compare the rule of the blessed Augustus to the mildness of your own” (*De Clementia*, 1.11.1) for although “the late Emperor Augustus was a mild prince… he appealed to arms while the state was shared among the triumvirate” (1.9.1). Seneca will go on to list Augustus’ faults while telling Nero of his own blank slate and superior virtue. An act along the same lines is tried here. For just as Augustus realized the error of his ways regarding clementia, in the *Apocolocyntosis* he comes to prioritize his mortal accomplishments over divine status. Early on in his rule, Augustus played up his own divine connection. Augustus “used the title Divi Filius in documents and on coins. The title Augustus, ‘the venerable,’ conferred by the senate and adopted by him as a surname, had a religious significance as designating one worthy of reverence, and marked him as one more than man” (Burton, 1912, p.82). Augustus, too, fell into the trap early on of thinking he needed a divine connection to raise him in the eyes of the people. Yet the peak of his reign corresponded with this being cast aside as his resumé spoke for itself. Augustus’ name became interchangeable with his public works, military victories, and the golden age he brought rather than the title “Son of a God.” As was the case in the *De Clementia,* Seneca suggests that Nero ought to sidestep Augustus’ mistakes and skip straight to his conclusions.

A suggestion of Livia’s seems to apply well upon the *Apocolocyntosis’* revelation that gods aren’t all they’re cracked up to be: “Do as the physicians do when the usual remedies fail, try their opposites” (*De Clementia*, 1.9.6). For it seems at this point that deification holds little meaning and that the gods have been reduced to their faults rather than their powers. Normally one may seek deification as the greatest honor a person can receive and view taking one’s rightful position in heaven as the pinnacle. Yet in Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* this isn’t holding up. Rather than focusing on taking his place above the clouds, the world below these and the greatness of the Roman Empire should be Nero’s focus and a testament to his abilities. Divine status isn’t his ticket to greatness; the imperial one he already possesses is—if he plays his cards right.

Through his publications in the infancy of Nero’s reign, Seneca sought to guide the emperor along the path of reason and virtue strayed from by his recent predecessors. Burton writes that philosophers and poets would only worship certain emperors through their works “whom they honored for their ability as rulers and their character as men” (Burton, 1912, p.88). Claudius lacked these, and so Seneca granted him the text of the *Apocolocyntosis* accordingly. Seneca possesses some hope for Nero, however, which is why in the hopes that he continue to act well and for the state he offered him short praises in Book 4. Seneca actively works to nudge Nero back onto the right path when he strays, creating texts that appeal to his vanity and desire for greatness that would align Nero’s definition of success with Seneca’s own.

Just as the *De Clementia* did, the *Apocolocyntosis* attempts to coax Nero into placing less stock in the physical appearance of power and status at the cost of proper mentality. Nero’s self-obsession was looming and with that would come the demise of the morality that Seneca held near and dear. As a consequence, Seneca desperately tried to head this off using whatever tools he could and even through manipulation of this same vanity. His hope for Nero was that he would indeed emulate Augustus in his virtue and deeds and cast aside the foolish idea of Apollo. He wanted Nero to be a Caesar, not a god, because with the latter came no need to prove oneself nor responsibility for one’s actions. Yet despite his best efforts, he miserably failed to get Nero to grasp the same point which one day Vespasian would use his last breaths to express. Vespasian, always focused on what he did in connection to Rome rather than public opinion, came to joke about Rome’s obsession with imperial deification. “I suppose I am becoming a god,” he said from his deathbed. Yet Nero never could reach this point in mentality, a fact that becomes all the more ironic when he ultimately was not deified. Although based on Seneca’s descriptions of the gods, maybe he should have been.

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