CHAPTER THREE

TOO CLOSE?
HISTORIAN AND POET IN THE APOCOLOCYNTOSIS

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A scholar and an historian ought to be treated with respect.

Pédant maniaque.¹

The Apocolocyntosis opens with an identity crisis. A speaker emerges to talk to an unidentified audience about a project he has in mind—volo is the main verb of the first sentence—but is challenged by an alter ego before he can get properly started on his material.² The first ego is a historian, the second an epic poet, and a behind-the-scene satirist pulls the strings to show us a mock battle for memory. Who gets to do the honors? Is historiography the right genre? Or epic? Neither? As it turns out, both narrative genres are deformed by the subject matter with which they are confronted in the work: the death and deification of Claudius. For this topic, the Apocolocyntosis suggests, we need satire, not history or poetry, and not memory but revenge.³

But revenge alone has never been a sufficient explanation for this satire. Indeed it has been impossible to identify any single purpose for the Apocolocyntosis, or even any single target. The work was topical at the time of its creation but remains readable. It is political but also literary, cruel but also educational, crude but also very very clever. Moreover,

¹ These references to Claudius come from Ronald Syme (1958) 1:436 and Jacques Heurgon (1953) 96 respectively. Both are somewhat tongue-in-cheek. The former alludes to Arnaldo Momigliano’s book on Claudius, and Momigliano (1961) ix himself expresses Syme’s real reaction thus: “an example of the natural and inevitable sympathy of a modern pedant for an ancient one.” Heurgon’s article argues against the attitude expressed by the words quoted here.

² The question of performance (if any) is not at issue here; the text operates in dramatic mode in the opening chapters. On performance of the original see Nauta (1987) 77–78.

³ Cf. Weinreich (1923) 16: “Die so objektiv sich gebende Darstellung ist in Wahrheit durch und durch Tendenzschrift, persönliche Haßgesang.”
it has been praised and pilloried with equal conviction. The praise is
winning out over the pillory these days, however, and the work is being
taken more and more seriously, with recent papers emphasizing the
political and ethical significance underlying the ridicule of Claudius.\textsuperscript{4} But
whatever scholarly box we try to put the \textit{Apocolocyntosis} into, it escapes
to show readers a new facet. The present paper tries to catch the glint
of one such facet: the deformation and defamation of historiography, so
striking in a satire on the deification of an emperor who fancied himself
a historian.\textsuperscript{5}

1. \textit{Fides penes auctorem erit}

That the satire fashions itself according to historiographical parameters
has long been recognized.\textsuperscript{6} The generic markers are many and various,
and they are found throughout the work.\textsuperscript{7} In the opening paragraph,
with its statement of subject matter and purpose (1.1 \textit{quid actum sit in
caelo ... volo memoriae tradere}, “I wish to transmit to memory what

\textsuperscript{4} See e.g. Braund and James (1998) on the significance of Claudius' bodily deformity;
Osgood (2007) on Seneca's construction of “an ideal emperor negatively through deri-
sion” (p. 345); Nussbaum (2009) on the proto-Stoic quality of the work's laughter.

\textsuperscript{5} Historiography was the occupation to which Claudius devoted himself when he
found himself excluded because of his physical disabilities from the traditional elite
career (see further section 2 below). Under Augustus and Tiberius, when his brother
Germanicus was going from success to success, Claudius' public role was practically nil;
Suetonius preserves some of his relatives' unflattering comments on Claudius (\textit{Cl. }3–5).
Claudius held full membership in the senate under Gaius and served as consul with his
nephew in AD 37 but is unlikely to have found much satisfaction in his new prominence,
since Gaius made him a figure of fun (\textit{Cl. }7–8).

\textsuperscript{6} The \textit{Apocolocyntosis} text is that of Eden (1984) (except that consonantal u is replaced
by v), unless otherwise noted.

\textsuperscript{7} Comment usually focuses on the historiographical elements of paragraph 1, but
there are also: a “last words” scene (4.3 \textit{ultima vox eius}), an obituary (4.3 \textit{omnia ... concacavit}), a second preface (5.1 \textit{in caelo quae acta sint audite}), verbal markers of
\textit{enargeia} (6.2 \textit{putares, 12.1 scires}), a methodological statement about the handling of
speeches (9.2 \textit{notarius persequi non potuit et idea non refero, ne alius verbis ponam quae
ab illo dicta sunt}—a policy, as is so often the case, “more honor'd in the breach ...”), plus
speeches both direct (Fever at 6.1, Claudius at 7.4–5, unknown god at 8.1–3, Janus at
9.3, Diespiter at 9.5, Augustus at 10.11–15) and indirect (5.2), and an \textit{agon} concerning
Claudius' punishment (14). Cf. also O'Gorman (2006) 99 on 6.1 (\textit{itaque quod Gallum
facere aportebit Romam cepit}): “This could well be a parodic sideswipe at the historical
exemplum and its alleged usefulness.” André (1998) and Ramelli (2001), which one
might assume from their titles to be about passages such as these, focus instead on the
\textit{Apocolocyntosis} as a historical source.