SENECA'S *APOCOLOCYNTOSIS* AS SATURNALIAN LITERATURE

BY

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The suggestion that Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*¹ was written for the Saturnalia of A.D. 54, some two months after the death of Claudius and the accession of Nero, is not in itself a new one. It was already known in the nineteenth century, but after Bücheler had dismissed it in his epoch-making edition from 1864, it was no longer mentioned in the subsequent commentaries by Ball, Weinreich, and Russo². The idea remained accessible, however, in the pages of Furneaux' commentary on Tacitus' *Annals*³, and from there (one may surmise) it found its way into some recent major publications by English scholars: Miriam Griffin’s authoritative monographs on both Seneca and Nero, F. R. D. Goodyear’s treatment of the satire in the *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, and P. T. Eden’s new standard edition of the text⁴). But none of these scholars devotes more space to the idea than a single paragraph, and there has been

¹) With the *communis opinio* I accept both Senecan authorship and the title *Apocolocyntosis* for the Menippean satire on Claudius which has come down to us.


no other pertinent research since Bächler5). The present paper owes its origin to a genuine surprise at this gap in the otherwise voluminous literature on the Apocolocyntosis6): to me the issue at stake seemed a very exciting one, opening up vistas of a detailed reconstruction of the communicatory situation in which the text originally functioned. But apparently the interest I felt in such a reconstruction was not shared (or not shared to the full) by the prevailing orientation in the study of Latin literature. It thus occurred to me that a systematic discussion of the Saturnalian character of the Apocolocyntosis might be an attractive manner in which to demonstrate an alternative orientation on literary history, and to suggest the kinds of gain to be had from it in Latin philology. This is what the present paper sets out to do.

The orientation I am referring to is the one now current in large areas of mediaevalistic literary research7). The central concept is communication: if literature is a form of communication, then the task of the study of literature is to describe the communicatory process of which author, work, and audience are a part. What is particularly important in this approach is that it brings the audience into its own at last: for it is impossible to describe the communication achieved by a literary work without analyzing what the work does to its audience and what the audience does to, and with, the work8).

5) Only after I finished my argument did I discover two articles which do treat the question at greater length, and even anticipate some of the points I make. The first, J. M. Haarberg, The Emperor as a Saturnalian King: on the Title of Apocolocyntosis, SO 57 (1982), 109-14 is a short paper by a Scandinavian semiotician, focusing on the title, the second a curious essay by the distinguished commentator on the Apocolocyntosis, C. F. Russo, Seneca anomimo di Stato, Belfagor 37(1982), 533-53, in which the ‘Saturnalian hypothesis’ (as it might be termed) is subordinated to a highly fantastical theory on Seneca’s ‘anonymity’. The reader will have gathered from my summaries the fundamental differences between these articles and mine.


7) As Prof. F. P. van Oostrom (cp. n. 84) informs me.

8) “What the work does to its audience” and “what the audience does to, and with, the work” are sometimes distinguished as Wirkung and Rezeption. But because of the confusion surrounding the distinction (cp. G. Grimm, Rezeptionsgeschichte (München 1977), 22-8) I will not use it, and talk of ‘reception’ throughout. Another terminological point: I use the word ‘audience’ without prejudice to the question of the ‘mode’ of reception: hearing a spoken text or reading a written one.