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Nero, Apollo, and the Poets
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Source: *Phoenix*, Vol. 57, No. 3/4 (Autumn - Winter, 2003), pp. 276-283
Published by: Classical Association of Canada
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3648517
Accessed: 23/03/2010 20:04

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NERO, APOLLO, AND THE POETS

EDWARD CHAMPLIN

TOWARD THE END OF HIS REIGN, Nero ostentatiously identified himself with Apollo the citharode, most notoriously in the great eiselastic "triumph" of late 67 which culminated with sacrifice not only to Capitoline Jupiter, but to Palatine Apollo as well, and to Sol in the Circus Maximus (Suet. *Nero* 25, 53). By then, Nero felt that his position as the equal of Apollo as a singer and Sol as a charioteer was assured, and Apollo the divine lyre-player adorned his coins. When did god and emperor first associate?

J. Toynbee answered the question sixty years ago in her paper on "Nero *Artifex*: The *Apocolocyntosis* Reconsidered."[1] Toynbee cited Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.14–15) and Cassius Dio (61.19–21) to the effect that, after the murder of Agrippina, Nero indulged in his long-suppressed desire to race chariots and to sing on stage—"Song was sacred to Apollo, and that famous god of prophecy was represented in a musician's dress" (Tacitus)—and that his chosen band of Augustiani then hailed him at his stage performance in the Juvenalia of 59 with the words "Glorious Caesar! Our Apollo, our Augustus, another Pythian!" (Dio). Toynbee concluded that "the Apollo aspect of the affair seems to be something quite new in 59: we have no trace of it in the early years of Nero's reign" (90). Toynbee's observation is so evidently correct that the ancient testimony need be mentioned only briefly. Most importantly, for Tacitus the Apolline equation is clearly something new, and he presents it in 59 as part of Nero's justification for his *vetus cupido* to perform in public. There is no hint of it earlier in the narrative. Similarly with Suetonius: beyond the two references late in the reign—that is, the "triumph" of 67, and the comparison with Apollo, both noted above—there is only the anonymous jibe, *dum tendit citharam noster, dum cornua Parthus, / noster erit Paean, ille Hecatebeletes* ("while ours strums his lyre, the Parthian's draws his bow; ours shall be Paean, theirs the Far-Shooter"). This is quoted along with two other pasquinades on the murder of Agrippina (59 or after) and one on the Golden House (64 or after), and the warlike Parthian Apollo can only have become topical after the embarrassing capitulation of Caesennius Paetus to the Parthians in 62.[2] Dio alludes to Nero as Apollo or Helios only twice after the notice of 59, and not before: while celebrating the triumphal coronation of Tiridates of Armenia in 66, the crowd at the theatre was protected from the sun by a purple awning, at the centre of which was the figure of Nero driving a chariot, surrounded by golden stars; and at his "triumph" of 67 the crowds cheered their emperor with "Hail to Nero Apollo."[3]

[1] Toynbee 1942; attacked (mistakenly, I believe) by Momigliano (1944).

[2] Suet. *Nero* 39 (pasquinades). Caesennius Paetus: Tac. *Ann.* 15.10–16; Dio 62.21.1.

[3] Dio 63.6.2; 63.20.5.

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As Toynbee remarked, the evidence of the coins confirms the late appearance of Apollo: the god, as Apollo the Lyre-Player, does not appear on the imperial coinage before ca A.D. 62.[4] Apollo is also depicted frequently on the contemporary provincial coins of Achaia and Thrace (though not at all in the Asian provinces or Syria): most of the issues are connected with the Greek tour of 66–67, and none was minted before 59 at the earliest.[5] In the extraordinary and extensive coinage of Alexandria, the god again turns up only in 66/68, along with other deities appropriate to Nero's athletic and artistic victories in Greece.[6] The coins are thus unanimous with the historians and the biographer in their silence: Nero did not put himself forward as Apollo until mid-59, after the murder of his mother.[7]

Problems appear, however, with the poets, specifically with the fourth and the seventh *Eclogues* of Calpurnius Siculus, and with a prophecy sung by Apollo himself early in Seneca's Menippean satire, the *Apocolocyntosis*. Both speak of the new Golden Age and both apparently present Nero as Apollo within months of his accession. The *Apocolocyntosis* is the more important witness. Toynbee was so disturbed by the chronological discrepancy between this text and the historical evidence that she was driven to a strikingly unorthodox conclusion: the work could not have been published before the year 60, more than five years after the death of Claudius which occasioned it. No one has followed her in this, and indeed there can be no serious doubt that the standard opinion is correct: the satire must have been written and circulated soon after the death of Claudius (13 October 54), perhaps in connection with the Saturnalia of December 54.[8] But the matter does not end there. Unknown to Toynbee, R. Heinze had already suspected that some material in sections 3 and 4 of the work were later additions; and, soon after she published her paper in 1942, K. Barwick argued from these sections, from a later passage, and from the work's apparent double title, that Seneca had indeed produced a "second edition" of his satire not long after the first.[9] Whatever one may make of this, the case is worth reopening here for the simple reason that the Golden Age terminology and the comparison of Nero with Apollo are closely confined to one section of the whole piece. They do not appear anywhere else but in the verses spoken by Phoebus in section 4. What does that signify?

[4] *RIC* I^2 73–76, 121–123, 205–212, 380–381, 384–385, 414–417, 451–455 (all *asses*). Cf. Suet. *Nero* 25.2.

[5] *RPC* I.1275 (Corinth), 1371 and 1376 (Nicopolis), 1439 (Thessalian League), 1599 (Thessalonica), 1752 (Perinthus).

[6] *RPC* 5301–02, 5317–18.

[7] The epigraphical evidence is largely undateable. Nero is the New Apollo at *IG* II/III^2 3278 and *AE* 1971, 435, and *AE* 1994, 1617 (all Athens). Cf. the New Helios at *ILS* 8794 (Acraephia, probably A.D. 66), 146 (Sagalassus); *SEG* XVIII.566 (Prostanna); also, Helios is associated with Nero at Aphrodisias, *AE* 1982, 892d.

[8] Eden 1984: 4–5; Coffey 1989: 168–169. The text below and all translations are those of P. T. Eden. For an elaborate but judicious summation, see Nauta 1987.

[9] Heinze 1926; Barwick 1944.

Claudius is dying slowly (*Apoc.* 2). Mercury urges the three Fates to end his life (3). Clotho acquiesces, promising to supply the emperor with companions in death, and (here, in section 4, Seneca shifts from prose into verse) she cuts off his thread of life. Her sister Lachesis, wearing a crown of Pierian laurel, takes a new white thread from a snowy fleece, but before she can begin to work it, it changes miraculously into gold. The Fates then joyfully spin out a new golden age, *aurea saecula*. Without effort the threads surpass in length the longest span of human life. Enter the prophet Apollo (his advent foreshadowed by the Pierian laurel) to help them and to explain everything:

Phoebus adest cantuque iuuat gaudetque futuris
et laetus nunc plectra mouet, nunc pensa ministrat:
detinet intentas cantu fallitque laborem.
dumque nimis citharam fraternaque carmina laudant,
plus solito neuere manus humanaque fata
laudatum transcendit. "ne demite, Parcae"
Phoebus ait "vincat mortalis tempora vitae
ille mihi similis uultu similisque decore
nec cantu nec uoce minor. felicia lassis
saecula praestabit legumque silentia rumpet.
qualis discutiens fugientia Lucifer astra
aut qualis surgit redeuntibus Hesperus astris,
qualis, cum primum tenebris Aurora solutis
induxit rubicunda diem, Sol aspicit orbem
lucidus et primos a carcere concitat axes:
talis Caesar adest, talem iam Roma Neronem
aspiciet. flagrat nitidus fulgore remisso
uultus et adfuso ceruix formosa capillo."

Phoebus was at hand and helped with his singing; he delighted in the years to come, and now joyfully plied his quill, now joyfully handed them their stints. He kept them intent on his singing and beguiled their toil; and while they praised their brother's lyre and songs extravagantly, their hands had spun more than usual, and the commended work exceeded human destinies. "Take nothing away, Fates," Phoebus said, "let the duration of human life be surpassed by him who is my like in looks and grace, and my equal in voice and song. He will guarantee an era of prosperity to the weary and break the silence of the laws. Like the Morning Star, as he rises scattering the stars in flight, or like the Evening Star, as he rises when the stars return (at dusk), like the gleaming Sun, as soon as rosy Dawn has dispelled the shadows and led in the day, as he gazes on the world and begins to whip up his chariot from the starting-barrier: such a Caesar is at hand, such a Nero shall Rome now gaze upon. His radiant face blazes with gentle brilliance and his shapely neck with flowing hair." (Tr. Eden)

Seneca returns to prose: *haec Apollo. at Lachesis, quae et ipsa homini formosissimo faueret, fecit illud plena manu et Neroni multos annos de suo donat* ("So Apollo.

Then Lachesis, because she too fancied such a very shapely fellow, behaved openhandedly and gave Nero many years from her supply"). Then, with the words *Claudium autem* ("but as for Claudius"), Seneca turns back to the dying emperor. It is in the preceding poem, and Apollo's prophecy, that both the source of Toynbee's problem and its resolution lie: not that the satire should be dated after late 54, but that most of this interlude is a later addition to it. There are several indications that these verses did not form part of the original text, and that they have been rather crudely inserted.

First, at *Apoc.* 2.4, Phoebus is past half-way in his course as driver of the sun, and is running his chariot down towards night—that is, it is afternoon, in fact just after noon (compare 2.2)—as Claudius enters his death-throes, *animam agere coepit* ("began to gasp his last").[10] Mercury urges Clotho to let the emperor go (3.1), and she cuts his thread. As Lachesis starts to spin out Nero's thread, Phoebus appears to sing of the golden future and to help the spinners in their task. But who is driving his chariot?

Second, at *Apoc.* 4.1, lines 1–2, Clotho breaks the thread of Claudius' life. That should mean that he dies at that moment. This is confirmed at 4.2 (just after the verses): *Claudium autem iubent omnes* χαίροντας, εὐφημοῦντας ἐκπέμπειν δόμων, "But as for Claudius, they ordered everybody to carry him out from the house with 'rejoicing and fair-speaking'."[11] So Claudius is dead. Yet immediately thereafter he is alive again, bubbling forth his soul, losing even the appearance of life, listening to comic actors and uttering his immortal exit line, *vae me, puto, concacavi me* (4.2–3).[12]

Third, Nero is compared at 4.1, lines 28–29 to "the gleaming Sun ... as he begins to whip up his chariot from the starting-barrier." This is a startlingly public and prescient reference to charioteering in 54 for a youth who by all other accounts carefully suppressed this *vetus cupido* until 59.

Fourth, and most disturbing, are the last three verses of the prophecy of Phoebus Apollo, 30–32: "such a Caesar is at hand, such a Nero shall Rome gaze upon. His radiant face blazes with gentle brilliance and his shapely neck with flowing hair" (*adfuso cervix formosa capillo*). One of the fundamental criteria

[10] *iam medium curru Phoebus diviserat orbem / et propior Nocti fessas quatiebat habenas / et obliquo flexam deducens tramite lucem* ("Phoebus in his chariot had already passed the middle of his orbit and, closer to Night, was shaking his weary reins, leading down his redirected light by a sloping path"). More prosaically, *inter sextam et septimam erat* ("it was between twelve noon and one o'clock," 2.2): this was the official version (Suet. *Nero* 8; Tac. *Ann.* 12.69.1), but the sources agree that Claudius actually died in the early hours of the morning.

[11] Eden (1984: 80), whose translation this is, notes that the Greek tag comes from Euripides' lost *Cresphontes* (fr. 449 line 4 Nauck^2), "to send forth from the house, rejoicing and speaking fair" (*sc.* "the dead man": because he has passed beyond mortal cares). Is it coincidence that the fragment comes from a speech by a mother (Merope) persuading her son (Cresphontes) to kill her husband, his step-father? For the plot, see Webster 1967: 136–143.

[12] Barwick pointed out the problem at 1944: 161–163.

employed by art historians to differentiate imperial "portrait-types" is hair-style. Five official portraits have been distinguished for Nero.[13] Until 59, he was shown wearing his hair flat on the neck and no more than medium in length, a conventional Julio-Claudian prince, distinguished only by the placement of the curls. "Flowing" (*adfusus*) simply does not describe what the world saw in 54 (and if it did, then all the Julio-Claudians, Claudius included, would be budding Apollos). It is only in 59, after the death of Agrippina, with his new Coin-Type IV (Hiesinger) or Terme-Type (Bergmann-Zanker) portrait, and even more so with his familiar final type, that Nero could be said in any way to have affected the flowing locks of an Apollo which so defined him, at just the same time as he began to appear in public dressed as a citharode.[14] The year 59, with the disappearance of his mother, was the great turning point in Nero's life. Whatever blazed on the shapely neck of the demure young prince in late 54, it was not flowing locks.

The conclusion should be that Apollo's song was interpolated later, in the 60s, a prophecy *ex eventu*. And there is confirmation of this in the simple observation that the entire passage can be excised smoothly, without leaving a trace of its passing. Everything after the second verse in 4.1 (*abrupit stolidae regalia tempora vitae*), and before the middle of 4.2 (*Et ille quidem animam ebulliit . . . .*) can just be removed. It will not be missed: Clotho cuts the thread of Claudius' life, *abrupit tempora vitae*; Claudius dies, *animam ebulliit*. After we make this excision, the early date of the *Apocolocyntosis* can be saved (soon after the death of Claudius), but any reference at that time to the Golden Age and the new Apollo should be abandoned. The prophecy of Phoebus was added to the satire by someone who knew how Nero would act *after* the death of Agrippina.[15] Phoebus speaks in this passage of the *aurea saecula*, and of the young emperor so like himself in looks and singing talent. Inevitably that seems to recall the flattery of Calpurnius Siculus: the rebirth of the golden age (*aurea aetas*) with peace (1.42); Roman Apollo (the emperor) as the patron of a young poet (4.9–10, 69–71); eloquent Apollo as Caesar's companion (4.87); the emperor as Phoebus Palatinus (4.159), his face a blend of the features of Mars and Apollo (7.84). From the mid-nineteenth century, and despite occasional dissent, it was long commonly agreed that these bucolic bids for imperial notice and patronage were produced early in the reign of Nero, between late 54 and ca 57.[16] However, extensive doubt has been expressed recently: the historical arguments for dating the pieces to the reign of Nero are fragile in the extreme; D. Armstrong has demonstrated in great detail that the poetry is redolent of the taste and practice of the third century and Late

[13] Hiesinger 1975, modified and extended by Bergmann and Zanker (1981).

[14] And at the same time, it should be added, as he adopted the out-thrust shelf of symmetrical curls over his forehead, the *coma in gradus formata* (Suet. *Nero* 51), which was the distinguishing coiffure of the charioteer.

[15] By whom and for what purpose, I do not know.

[16] See the confident survey at Momigliano 1944.

Antiquity rather than of the Silver Age; and E. Courtney has shown as certainly as such things can be shown that Calpurnius Siculus knew and imitated the works of Statius and Martial (and possibly Juvenal), works written considerably after the death of Nero.[17] No one has answered their arguments. Powerful surveys of the question by N. Horsfall and B. Baldwin have hammered the point home: Calpurnius could not have written his poems until long after Nero's death. Therefore they must not be used as evidence for Neronian ideology.[18] The similarities between the prophecy in Seneca and the eclogues of Calpurnius are no more than commonplaces, separated by centuries.

After the flattery of Calpurnius and the prophecy of Phoebus in the *Apocolocyntosis* have been removed from the picture, there is not much left. The two miserable lumps of verse known as the *Einsiedeln Eclogues* are by universal consent later than the eclogues of Calpurnius Siculus, and must follow where he goes (probably into the third century). An epigram by Antiphilus of Byzantium in the Greek Anthology proclaims that Rhodes, formerly the island of the Sun, is now the island of Caesar, for Nero, his radiance outshining that of the Sun, has saved her as she was sinking. It has been argued and generally accepted that this celebrates the occasion in 53 when Nero, at the age of fifteen, eloquently persuaded the emperor Claudius to restore their freedom to the people of Rhodes. Yet the poem neither owes nor adds anything to any putative Apolline ideology being developed at Rome in 54, for the conceit here of comparing Nero to the Sun has nothing to do with the symbolic attributes of the young emperor as the handsome Apollo-like charioteer, citharode, and bringer of peace; rather it is unavoidably forced on the poet by his subject, Rhodes, the island of the Sun, where the cult of Helios flourished as nowhere else. In short, the evidence of the poets that Nero was greeted as a new Apollo at his accession melts away on inspection.[19] There is thus no sign that Nero was connected in the public mind with Apollo before he himself called on the image in the latter half of 59 to justify his playing the cithara. Tacitus reports the argument which the emperor advanced then, that singing was sacred to Apollo, and that the great prophetic god was represented as standing in the garb of a citharode not only in the cities of Greece but in Roman

[17] Armstrong 1986; Courtney 1987.

[18] Horsfall 1993; Baldwin 1995; Horsfall 1997. Coleman (1993: 57) acknowledges that the poems should not offer a basis for observations on the reign of Nero; a decade earlier the same journal published no fewer than three refutations of the idea that Calpurnius flourished not under Nero but in the early third century.

[19] *Anth. Pal.* 9.178, on which see Cameron 1980: 43–47. Nero and Rhodes: Suet. *Nero* 7, cf. *Claudius* 25; Tac. *Ann.* 12.58. The absence of Nero as Apollo in Seneca's contemporary prose treatise *On Mercy* should also be noted. Dated to between 15 December 55 and 14 December 56 (Griffin 1976: 407–411), it presents the young prince as the gods' vice-regent on earth, urges him to model himself after them, and (as might be expected in the first years of a new reign) compares him in passing with the sun, but it quite misses the chance to single out the god Apollo as his special friend: *Clem.* 1.1.2, 3.3 (*clarum et beneficum sidus*), 5.7, 7.1–2, 8.4 (the sun).

temples—he did not need to add that the statue of Apollo Palatinus himself was dressed as a citharode.[20] According to Tacitus, Nero first semi-publicly indulged his *vetus cupido* in the theatre at his Juvenalia, sometime after his return to Rome on 23 June 59, three months after the death of Agrippina, and then it was that his Augustiani first hailed him as Apollo and another Pythian.[21] But the real poetic spark for the image came soon thereafter, in the first firmly datable contemporary rendering of Nero as Apollo, in the prologue to Lucan's *Pharsalia*. When Nero rises to heaven after his death he will naturally become chief of the gods, taking either the sceptre from Jupiter or the reins from Phoebus, to guide the chariot of the sun around the earth:

> *. . . seu sceptra tenere*
> *seu te flammigeros Phoebi conscendere currus,*
> *telluremque nihil mutato sole timentem*
> *igne vago lustrare iuvet* (*BC* 1.47–50)

whether you wish to wield the scepter or to mount the flame-bearing chariot of Phoebus and to light up with wandering flames an earth that does not fear an altered sun.

Even better, the poet need not wait for this apotheosis. To him Nero is already a god and the poet has no need to appeal to Apollo or Bacchus for inspiration, for Nero himself will give him the strength to sing a Roman song:

> *Sed mihi iam numen; nec, si te pectore vates*
> *accipio, Cirrhaea velim secreta moventem*
> *sollicitare deum Bacchumque avertere Nysa:*
> *tu satis ad vires Romana in carmina dandas.* (*BC* 63–66)

But to me you are already a god, and if I, the seer, receive you in my heart, I would not wish to disturb the god behind the Cirrhaean mysteries, or to summon Bacchus from Nysa: you are enough to invigorate Roman poetry.

These words the young Lucan first recited at the Neronian Games, in 60. It was then, and not in 54, that a true poet established Nero as the New Apollo.[22]

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[20] Zanker 1983: 21–40; Lefèvre 1989: 18–19.

[21] Tac. *Ann.* 14.14–15; Dio 20.1–5. Return to Rome June 23: *CIL* VI.2042, 24–32, explicated by Scheid (1990: 394–400).

[22] The significance of Nero's Apolline and Solar imagery, and the significance of their chronology, are considered in the fifth chapter of Champlin 2003.

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