

Seneca and Petronius in Tacitus' *Annals*
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A certain Petronius (possibly the author of the *Satyricon*) was forced by Nero to commit suicide in 66 CE. His life and death are described in two paragraphs of Tacitus' *Annals* (16.18-19). Several scholars have noted that Petronius' death scene caricatures that of the far more famous Seneca; the connection between the men's lives and deaths is, however, more extensive than has been shown. Through the contrast between Petronius and Seneca, Tacitus reveals the essentially perverse and corrupting nature of Nero's reign: under this emperor, the great orator and philosopher becomes an absurd failure, while the debauched scoundrel triumphs in life, and even achieves a sort of glory in his death.

Like Seneca, Petronius (before his fall) serves as an advisor of sorts to Nero. But while Seneca tries to serve as a good moral influence (13.2.1), Petronius, as *arbiter elegantiae* (16.18.2), has authority only over frivolous matters, gaining his authority by *ignavia* and by a reputation for vice. Of the two, Petronius is by far the more effective at influencing the emperor's behavior. Seneca's attempts to improve Nero's character are never entirely successful: from the beginning he and Burrus must settle for limiting to emperor to "permitted pleasures" (*quo facilius lubricam principis aetatem, si virtutem aspernaretur, voluptatibus concessis retinerent*, 13.2.1), and even those limitations are eventually discarded. Petronius' word, by contrast, is an absolute law in his areas of expertise: *nihil amoenum et molle adfluentia [Nero] putat, nisi quod ei Petronius adprobavisset*.

The last acts of the two men reveal the same contrasts they showed in their lives. Seneca, when he knows he must die, asks for his will; it is refused, but he is satisfied to leave behind his example in the *famam tam constantis amicitiae* (15.62.1). The dying Petronius, as always concentrating on the base and physical, speaks *not* about anything that might bring him any *gloriam constantiae* (16.19.2), but about light and frivolous matters; scorning Seneca's higher concerns, he nevertheless succeeds where the philosopher failed, exercising final control over his will by breaking his signet ring to prevent its misuse.

Even Petronius' actual suicide is a mockery of Seneca's. Seneca tries three times to kill himself. First, he cuts his wrists, aiming for a noble Roman death like that of Thrasea Paetus (16.35): but the very philosophical moderation of his life (*corpus. . . parco victu tenuatum*, 15.63.3) prevents him from dying. Next he drinks hemlock, hoping to die like Socrates; but this, too, fails. Finally, he must take to his private bath to let his blood run out, a picture of decadent Neronian luxury. Petronius goes through a wavering between death and life similar to Seneca's; but in his case, it is by choice. After cutting his wrists, he binds them up and opens them again according to whim, *ut quamquam coacta mors fortuitae similis esset* (16.19.2). The determination to make his death an accident, out of his control, is a reversal of the Stoic principle that one should make one's fate one's own choice: *quae autem dementia est potius trahi quam sequi!* (Seneca, *De Vita Beata* 15.6).

Seneca is a brilliant orator, and tutor to the emperor; Petronius concerns himself only with worthless entertainments. In a sane Roman society, Seneca would be successful, Petronius low and despised. But under Nero, everything is turned on its head. Frivolity and luxury are the only ways to gain power and, even, an honorable reputation (as, through Tacitus' description of his death, Petronius does). The traditional Roman path of oratory and political involvement now leads to failure and disgrace. Seneca is, in the end, a pathetic figure. He bears much of the blame for his fate, but he also lived in an impossible situation: attempts to be virtuous under Nero are doomed, since success is gained, not by true learning or virtue, but by *erudito luxu* (*Annals* 16.18.1).

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