

Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* and the Definition of Menippean Satire

Although scholars agree that Menippean satire is a genre in and of itself, no one has yet produced an adequate list of defining characteristics for the genre. Three definitions prevail in current scholarship: those of Mikhail Bakhtin, Joel Relihan and Howard Weinbrot. Although these definitions make advances in our understanding of the genre, each ultimately suffers the same problems: (1) ranking incidental elements as fundamental and (2) treating fundamentally identical elements as distinct. Bakhtin's fourteen elements produce an overall definition that is too broad and leaves the door open for the labeling of nearly any work as a Menippean satire. For example, Bakhtin lists fantasy/the carnival (element 2), fantastic situations (element 3), use of the spheres of heaven, earth and hell (element 6) and "observation from some unusual point of view" (element 7) as separate elements, although they are essentially one element; for a journey to heaven and/or hell is fantastical and implies observation from an unusual point of view. He further lists the use of other genres, especially poetry, in order to parody them (element 12) and being "multi-styled and multi-toned" (element 13) as distinct elements, although any work that combines prose, verse and parody will inevitably be "multi-styled and multi-toned". In response, Joel Relihan attempts to redefine the genre, reducing the list to five fundamental elements. Although Relihan's definition is a welcome improvement to Bakhtin's list, repetitions and incidental elements are still present. Relihan's fifth element, the use of the three subtexts of the *Odyssey*, Old Comedy and Platonic myth, apply equally to many genres of ancient literature, such as epic and lyric poetry, drama, and even oratory and history. In addition, Relihan's fourth element, the use of jokes at the expense of learning, is incidental to his third element, a general burlesque tone; after all, something that is burlesque parodies and mocks (ie: makes jokes as the expense of) many things (including learned people and subjects). Howard Weinbrot, in recent years, has put forth a third definition of Menippean satire that consists of six fundamental elements, though with less success than Relihan. For instance, his fourth element states that a Menippean satire is either tightly or loosely plotted, but this says nothing about Menippean satire that could not be applied to a work of any other genre.

This paper attempts to rework Bakhtin's, Relihan's and Weinbrot's lists into a more consistent and usable definition of Menippean satire, extracting the fundamental elements from each list and showing under which fundamental element the incidental elements fall. The *Apocolocyntosis*, the only Menippean satire that has survived nearly intact and upon which the conclusions are based, provides evidence for no more than four fundamental elements: (1) a surreal depiction of society and/or the world as a whole (the carnival); (2) the use of many other genres, either to parody the genres themselves, society's view of them, or both; (3) a general burlesque tone; and, (4) the use of comedy to heighten uneasiness or fear, and the use of that uneasiness or fear to incite reflection about the meaning of the satire.