Apocolocyntosis (The Pumpkinification of Claudius)

Seneca · *AD 54 · W. H. D. Rouse, 1920, Project Gutenberg #10001*

Seneca's short Menippean satire records, without malice or favour, the proceedings in heaven on October 13, the last day of the Emperor Claudius. Mercury begs a Fate to make an end: four and sixty years the poor wretch has panted for breath. Claudius bubbles up the ghost in mid-joke; the gods debate whether to make him one of themselves; Augustus will keep the mask no longer; and in the lower regions Aeacus finds a new, senseless task for him.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What becomes of an emperor, once the Fates have snapped his thread, if heaven will not have him and the dead can still accuse?

"Kill him, and let a better man rule in empty court."

Mercury · Mercury to one of the Fates

Clotho snaps off the last bit of that Imperial dunce, while Lachesis spins golden years for Nero. Claudius, who could not make an end of dying, is led before the gods, caps verses with Hercules, and is exposed as a native Gaul who took Rome. After a lacuna, Augustus speaks of killings in the family. Mercury screws his neck and hales him downward. Pedo charges him with senators and knights murdered, as the sands of the sea-shore. Aeacus will not hear the defence. The sentence is to rattle dice for ever in a box with no bottom; then Caligula claims him and he is made a law-clerk.

KEY CHARACTERS

Claudius
the dead emperor, sixty-four years panting, who always did make a mess of everything

Mercury
pleased with his wit; he begs the Fates, then screws his neck and leads him down

Clotho and Lachesis
one snaps the dunce's thread; the other spins golden years for Nero

Hercules and Augustus
the club at the gate, and the deified father who will not keep the mask

Aeacus, Pedo, and Caligula
the judge, the accuser among the murdered friends, and the claimant who makes him a clerk

Grades 11–12
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01 October the Thirteenth

THE RECORD

A historian who will say whatever trips off his tongue.

I wish to place on record the proceedings in heaven October 13 last, of the new year which begins this auspicious age. It shall be done without malice or favour. This is the truth. The same day made the narrator free, which was the last day for him who made the proverb true—One must be born either a Pharaoh or a fool.

If an authority must be produced, ask of the man who saw Drusilla translated to heaven: the same man will aver he saw Claudius on the road, dot and carry one. He is the custodian of the Appian Way; by that route both Tiberius and Augustus went up to the gods. Before company he is dumb, having been given the lie in the Senate.

The month was October, the day the thirteenth, between midday and one after noon. Claudius began to breathe his last, and could not make an end of the matter.

02 A Better Man in an Empty Court

THE FATES

Mercury begs an end; golden years are spun for Nero.

Mercury, who had always been much pleased with his wit, drew aside one of the three Fates: "Cruel beldame, why do you let the poor wretch be tormented? After all this torture cannot he have a rest? Four and sixty years it is now since he began to pant for breath." The astrologers have never let a year pass without laying him out for burial. "Do what has to be done: Kill him, and let a better man rule in empty court."

Clotho had wished to give him another hour or two, until he should make Roman citizens of the half dozen who are still outsiders—Greeks, Gauls, Spaniards, Britons, and all. She opens her box: three spindles, for Augurinus, Baba, and Claudius, to die within one year, so that he need not go unattended.

She snaps off the last bit of the life of that Imperial dunce. But Lachesis plucks new threads, not common wool but golden wire, and Phoebus sings of Caesar: so Nero shows his face to Rome. Lachesis bestows years and years upon Nero out of her own pocket. As for Claudius, they tell everybody to speed him on his way with cries of joy and solemn litany.

> *"Kill him, and let a better man rule in empty court."*
> **Mercury** · Mercury to one of the Fates

03 A Mess of Myself

THE DEATH AND THE ROAD TO HEAVEN

Last words, and a stranger who wags his head.

At once he bubbled up the ghost, and there was an end to that shadow of a life. He was listening to a troupe of comedians when he died. The last words he was heard to speak in this world were these. When he had made a great noise with that end of him which talked easiest, he cried out, "Oh dear, oh dear! I think I have made a mess of myself." Whether he did or no, I cannot say, but certain it is he always did make a mess of everything.

What happened next on earth is mere waste of time to tell: no one forgets his own happiness. Word comes to Jupiter that a stranger had arrived, a man well set up, pretty grey, wagging his head ceaselessly, dragging the right foot.

Claudius is delighted to find literary men up there, and hopes there might be some corner for his own historical works. He caps Hercules with Homer: breezes wafted him from Ilion—but the next verse is more true: he sacked a city and slew the people every one.

04 The House of the Gods

HERCULES, JANUS, AUGUSTUS

A Gallic cock, a lacuna, and a father who will keep the mask no longer.

Our Lady of Malaria, who has lived with him all these years, says the fellow's tale is nothing but lies: he was born at Lyons, at the sixteenth milestone from Vienne, a native Gaul. So of course he took Rome, as a good Gaul ought to do. Hercules tells him he has come to the place where the mice nibble iron, and strikes a tragic attitude with his club.

The Gallic cock was worth most on his own dunghill. Some pages have fallen out, in which Hercules must have been persuaded; the gods are now discussing what Hercules tells them. What species of god should the fellow be made? An Epicurean he cannot be; a Stoic?—he has neither heart nor head. Jupiter has Claudius led out, and Father Janus is asked his opinion.

Then arose the blessed Augustus, and spoke with much eloquence. Since the day he was made a god he has never uttered one word; he always minds his own business. But now he can keep on the mask no longer. Is it for this he has made peace by land and sea? Claudius killed Messalina, whose great-uncle Augustus was no less than his. "I don't know," did you say? Not to know was worse than to kill. The motion is passed without further debate.

05 A Box with No Bottom

THE LOWER REGIONS

A funeral on the Sacred Way, a charge as the sands of the sea, and dice that will not stay.

Mercury screwed his neck and haled him to the lower regions, to that bourne from which they say no traveller returns. On the Sacred Way they pass a most gorgeous funeral. When Claudius saw his own funeral train, he understood that he was dead. He is charmed to hear his praises sung, and would have stayed longer, but is led, head wrapped, down between Tiber and the Subway.

His freedman Narcissus had gone down before him by a short cut. The dead whom Claudius sent gather to meet him—knights, freedmen, friends, the family. "Friends everywhere, on my word! How came you all here?" Pedo Pompeius answers: "Who but you sent us, you, the murderer of all the friends that ever you had? To court with you!"

Aeacus holds court under the Lex Cornelia. The summons: Senators killed, 35; Roman Knights, 221; others as the sands of the sea-shore for multitude. A remand is not granted; Aeacus will not hear the defence, and quotes, "As he did, so be he done by, this is justice undefiled." They will not relieve Sisyphus, Tantalus, or Ixion. Aeacus decrees he should rattle dice for ever in a box with no bottom. Then Caligula claims him for a slave, and makes him a present to Aeacus, who delivers him to his freedman Menander, to be his law-clerk.

Satire · A Dead Emperor · Judgment · Folly · A Senseless Task

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The date is given twice, once in verse and once in prose: October 13, between midday and one. The work is a record of that day's proceedings in heaven, written as if by a freed witness. AD 54 is the year of Claudius's death.
2. "Kill him, and let a better man rule in empty court" is spoken before the golden thread is spun for Nero. The satire's praise of the new Caesar is part of the joke, and part of the politics. Read it as Seneca's age would have heard it, not as a simple moral.
3. The last words—"Oh dear, oh dear! I think I have made a mess of myself"—and the comment that follows are the book's key in a single door. The body and the reign fail in the same sentence.
4. A lacuna is honestly marked: some pages have fallen out. What remains of the heavenly debate, and of Augustus's speech, is still enough. The final punishment is not the old labours, but a craving without result: dice in a box with no bottom, and then a clerk's place under a murderer.

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