

Petronius, Seneca, and Lucan: A Neronian Literary Feud?*

J. P. SULLIVAN

The chronological problems of the literature of the Neronian period have only gradually yielded to the patient efforts of scholars.¹ The task was complicated by the customary indifference of Roman historians and critics to the exact dating of literary productions and by the frequent and understandable reluctance of ancient writers to name prominent contemporaries in hostile contexts.² Enough of a rough framework, however, has now been established for us to begin to address ourselves to the real critical questions, notably, the nature and ideological aims, if any, of the literary controversies of the period. Although literature can be used to vent petty spite, air personal differences, and curry patronage, these controversies are sometimes debates about *principles*: about how to write and what to write about. If we do not investigate these early Battles of the Books, we are liable to forget that many of our established classics are firmly rooted in contemporary concerns, even in other contemporary writings, and so misapprehend their true character. In this paper I propose to connect some pieces of historical evidence from Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio with the literary evidence furnished us by Petronius, Lucan, and Seneca in order to throw light on one such battle.

The literary renaissance under Nero, emperor and *artifex*, was, externally at least, as impressive as the flowering of Latin literature under Augustus. At

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¹ See, e.g. Momigliano 1944, 96; Faider 1934, 3; Münscher 1922, 53; Rose 1966, 379; Sullivan 1968, ch. 1.

² For example, we do not know who Callimachus' Telchines were, Ovid's Ibis, or the poetasters of Persius' first satire; even Horace's feud with Propertius involves some guesswork.

any rate it has left us as many established and extant classics, even if Seneca, Pliny, Lucan, Persius, Calpurnius, and Petronius are conventionally rated lower than Vergil, Horace, and the other Augustans. Rewards for artistic achievements in terms of money and influence were great,³ although the penalties for misapplied genius were perhaps greater, particularly as Nero's own artistic ambitions⁴ added to the ever-present political dangers that faced all imperial writers and wits.⁵ But there was no dearth of literary production.

Apart from the literary recitals that Persius mocks in his first satire (15 ff.), and the usual publication in book form, the emperor's own interests and ambitions added some more avenues of publication: notably public and semi-public exhibitions, often of a dramatic kind (Plin. *NH* 14,51), and literary contests (with prizes), such as the *Ludi Iuvenales* in 59 A.D. (Dio 62,19) and the *Neronia* of 60 and 65 A.D.⁶ Nero even organized trained clagues for the applause.⁷ But these were all full-dress occasions, and we know of other, less formal occasions for artistic expression. Apart from his early after-dinner sessions with the musician Terpnus (Suet. *Nero* 19), Nero established

³ Consider, for example, Menecrates' rewards (Suet. *Nero* 30); the foundation of Seneca's power was his reputation as the leading literary light of the period (Plin. *NH* 14,51), which led to his recall from exile to serve as Nero's tutor.

⁴ For Nero's literary interests and artistic abilities the main evidence is: Suet. *Nero* 10,12; 11,3; 20–21; 30,2; 38,2; 42–43 (*iocularia carmina*), 52,1; *Vitell.* 11,2 (*Neronian cantica*); Dio 61,20 (his poem at the *Ludi Iuvenales*), 62,20,1–2; 62,21,2; 62,29,1 (the *Troica*), 63,1,1–2; 63,3; 63,8,2; Juv. 8,220ff.; Tac. *Ann.* 14,52 (his stage appearances).

⁵ Nero was unpredictable in this matter. He tolerated a certain toughness in Burrus (Dio 52,13,1–2) and calculated impudence from Petronius and Otho (Plut. *Mor.* 60DE; *Galba* 19,3); he even tolerated lampoons (Suet. *Nero* 39,1–2). But he resented Vestinus' jokes, which perhaps struck too close to home (Tac. *Ann.* 15,68), and Cornutus was exiled for criticizing his literary projects (Dio 62,29,2). Although the emperor himself was not above writing a malicious poem (*probrosum carmen*) against Afranus Quintianus (Tac. *Ann.* 15,49), Lucius Fabricius Veiento was banished for his libelous 'codicilli' against the priesthood and the senate (*ibid.* 14,50), and the praetor Antistus Sosianus suffered a similar fate for his *probrosa adversus principem carmina*, delivered at a crowded dinner party at the house of Ostorius Scapula (*ibid.* 14,48–49). It was safer to chalk anonymous verses on the wall about Nero's matricide (Suet. *Nero* 39; Dio 62,29,4).

⁶ A third of the performance in 60 A.D. was devoted to *mousikê*, i.e. poetry and oratory. Quite eminent men contended, although Nero won the prize for the lyre (Suet. *Nero* 20). It is possible to make too much of these first *Neronia*, as does Toynbee 1942, 83, who wishes to transfer to them the *Apocolocyntosis*, Calpurnius' *Bucolica*, the second of the *carmina Einsiedlensia*, and part of Lucan's *Pharsalia*. Bagnani 1954, 66 wished to ascribe to them the publication of part of Petronius' *Satyricon* (but in what class could it have been entered?). Against these views, see Momigliano 1944, 96, and Rose 1966, 379.

⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 14,2; Suet. *Nero* 20; Dio 61,20,1–2.

also a kind of poetry workshop, from which some shavings of the emperor's own survived, at least until Suetonius' time (*ibid.* 52). Under the year 59 A.D. Tacitus tells us that the emperor formed a literary circle that went into session after dinner (*Ann.* 14,16). This circle was composed of associates with some faculty for verse whose abilities had not yet attracted public attention (*quibus aliqua pangendi facultas necdum insignis erat*). Here they would revise half-completed productions or offer impromptu compositions for the imperial criticism and revision, as Nero was supposed to have a pretty knack for such things.⁸ We hear of both poetry-readings and lyre-recitals at Nero's house (Suet. *Nero* 10,22). It would be into this circle that Lucan with his precocious gifts and, perhaps more important, with his uncle Seneca's influence at court, was introduced, perhaps being recalled from Athens for the purpose. And here no doubt developed that friendly competition with Nero that the Voss Life speaks of. It was public fame of course that led to Lucan's fall from the imperial favor.

Tacitus is rather slighting about the productions of this coterie, but he cannot have seen them all, and its very existence is a further proof of Nero's genuine, if jealous, literary interests. Moreover philosophical debates varied the poetic diet, even if inconclusive dialectic and sectarian squabbles rather than the truth provided the interest and amusement. Tacitus informs us sardonically that there was no dearth of apparently serious philosophers in attendance. And it might have been at such a literary-philosophical *soirée* that Annaeus Cornutus, stoic tragedian, philosopher, and critic, and one of the editors of Persius' satires, unwisely criticized Nero's project for a long poem on Roman history (Dio 62,29,2).

It is clear from the evidence that such a circle bred rivalry, friendly or otherwise; and of course reputation and power built on literary fame incite both jealousy and attack. There was one pre-eminent example of influence gained by literary achievements – Seneca. Almost from the beginning, Seneca's writings had had purposes beyond the natural Stoic aim of improving mankind. The flattery of the emperor Claudius and his freedman Polybius from exile may not have had an immediate effect, but the *Consolatio ad Polybium* and Seneca's other writings undoubtedly built up his reputation,

⁸ Suet. *Nero* 42. He had been taught impromptu oratory by Seneca (Tac. *Ann.* 14,52). This particular talent was as highly prized in Neronian times as at any other period. Remmius Palaemon (cf. Suet. *De gramm.*) and Lucan were renowned for it, and two characters in Petronius' *Satyricon* preen themselves on their instant verses (*Sat.* 4,5; 109,8).

until it was natural that Agrippina should recall him to become the young Nero's tutor. His position of influence with the wayward prince was no doubt reinforced by his ghost-writing the emperor's speeches (Quint. *Inst.* 8,5,19; Tac. *Ann.* 13,3) and his continued flow of literary work, including the *De clementia* and his attack on the dead Claudius in the *Apocolocyntosis*. It is difficult to believe, therefore, that Seneca, with his jealously guarded reputation⁹ as the leading literary figure at the court, would have had no part, or taken no interest, in these literary gatherings, at least before his gradual retirement from public life in 62 A.D. Was the admission of his nephew Lucan to the circle a sign of this interest? In fact, two of the charges made by his enemies (who multiplied after the death of Burrus) were that Seneca claimed sole honors for eloquence and had also started writing verses more frequently now that Nero had developed an affection for it (Tac. *Ann.* 14,52). The implication is that Seneca had written more verse – or plays – either as contributions to these literary symposia or to counteract them by his independent productions. In either event he would be trying to safeguard his standing with the artistically-minded emperor. Certainly in Tacitus' account, Seneca's accusers had urged Nero to rid himself of a vain and pretentious guide, which suggests that, in positive or negative ways, the philosopher had tried to retain his earlier position as the director of Nero's literary tastes. His praise for a line of Nero's verse in the *Naturales quaestiones* (15,6) wistfully recalls his former status as chief critic. Such a status would not be tolerated easily by the *genus irritabile vatum* now around Nero. Certainly an attack on Seneca's *literary* gifts seems indicated by Seneca's temporary modesty about them in 62 A.D., when he offered to lay down his power and riches and retire;¹⁰ he terms them *studia in umbra educata*, their reputation due solely to their supposed help in educating the prince. From this date on, Seneca withdrew from court life, devoting himself to writing, valetudinarianism, or sightseeing in the more fashionable parts of Campania. With the

⁹ One recalls with amusement the familiar anecdote that Seneca diverted Nero's attention from Cicero so that his own style might shine the brighter.

¹⁰ For Seneca's poems, see Quint. *Inst.* 10,1,129; Plin. *Ep.* 5,3 (erotic verses, which would be appropriate enough in Neronian circles); Tac. *Ann.* 14,52; Prisc. *lib.* 7,759 (Putsch), where it is stated that the poems were originally in four books. The emperor's refusal of his offer should not be taken too seriously in view of *POxy.* inv. 3B36/G(3–4), which is dated to 25 Oct. 62 A.D.: a μισθωτής was running Seneca's property in Egypt and this indicates that it (or some of it) had been confiscated by Nero, which may explain the tone of *Ep.* 77. See Bowne 1968, 17 ff and Rostovtzeff 1957, 2:671, 3:25.

death of Burrus and the subsequent semi-retirement of Seneca, Nero entered more fully into his own, and came under the influence of very different advisers from those he formerly had: Tigellinus and Petronius were among them.

A tablet from Herculaneum has enabled us to date Petronius' consulship to around 61 A.D.,¹¹ and Tacitus' account (*Tac. Ann.* 16,18–20) then gives us his career in more detail.¹² After his consulship Petronius entered the small circle of Nero's intimates. Not, however, the really close circle, of which Tigellinus was a member, for Petronius had to get the details of Nero's less elegant and more orgiastic amusements from his partner in vice, Silia, a consular's wife. Now if Petronius was not master of these revels, but simply Nero's *arbiter elegantiae*, it is a reasonable assumption that over and above his taste for lavish expenditure and flourspar wine-dippers, attested by Pliny and Plutarch,¹³ Petronius had ingratiated himself by his cultural interests. Suetonius even tells us that Nero distributed friendship and hostility according to the lavishness of men's praises for his vocal performances. How many circles would the emperor have had? Excluding the small disreputable clique that included Tigellinus and Silia, would the *paucos familiarium* of *Annals* 16 be quite different from those *quibus aliqua pangendi facultas necdum insignis erat* of *Annals* 14?¹⁴ There is no sign that Nero's literary interests waned as time went on – quite the contrary. Even the fire of Rome, if the stories are true, could not entirely divert his mind from more serious things, such as his poem on the capture of Troy. Are we to postulate that the emperor spent one night discussing someone's verses or reading his own; and the next, for relaxation, closeted with Silia, Tigellinus, Sporus, and

¹¹ Tab. Herc. Ins. V no. 22: see Carratelli 1946, 381.

¹² The identity of the suffect consul of 60, 61, or 62, T. Petronius Niger, with the courtier described by Tacitus and the author of the *Satyricon* has been most fully demonstrated by the late K. F. C. Rose 1961; cf. Syme 1958, 387 n. 743. The present paper will, I hope, demonstrate still further the likelihood of the identification.

¹³ Plin. *NH* 37,8,20; Plut. *Mor.* 60E.

¹⁴ Tacitus' failure to connect these two groups is not decisive: not only is there a three-year interval or so between the beginning of the literary *soirées* and Petronius' admission into Neronian circles, but it is also likely that Tacitus is using two different sources. His account of Petronius himself might well come from one of the Hadrianic-Trajanic biographical collections or a collection of the *exitus virorum illustrium* of the sort composed by Pliny's friends Gaius Fannius and Titinius Capito; see Plin. *Ep.* 5,51; 8,12,4; and Bardon 1956, 2:207–209. If Petronius was a man of literary as well as material good taste, the combination in the *Satyricon* of literary criticism and parody with satire on personal or material vulgarity would be highly appropriate.

other disreputable orgiasts of that ilk? A literary-minded emperor would have a fair number of literary-minded friends such as Lucan. It is a reasonable assumption that Petronius was among them.

This *a priori* possibility can only be validated by evidence, but before we turn to the *Satyricon* itself, let us look still closer at the literary situation at Nero's court about this period. The figure of Lucan naturally forces itself on our attention. His precocious literary talents, seen in such early works as his *Iliacon* and *Catachthonion* and well-known no doubt in Athens, coupled perhaps with his uncle's influence, had brought him the emperor's attention, his friendship, and fast political advancement. He was admitted into the *cohors amicorum*, accorded senatorial status, and granted a very early quaestorship (in 60 A.D., when he was only 20).¹⁵ Naturally we cannot surmise how he reacted to Seneca's involuntary fall from grace in 62 A.D., or to the old man's replacement by more sinister – or more frivolous – influences. But Seneca's retirement from court life seems to have been gradual and free from any immediate danger. He went on publishing literary works, and perhaps we can detect in them and in that fact the hope that the flattery in them and their gentle moralizing might simultaneously close the emperor's eyes to the writer's alleged faults and open his ears to the implicit criticism of the court circle. But Lucan's talents soon became too much for the emperor: as Balzac said, friendships last when each friend thinks he has a slight superiority over the other. After their initial friendly rivalry, Nero deliberately offended the poet, and the latter was banned from oratory and from publishing his poetry.¹⁶ The ban is dated to the year 65 A.D. by Dio, and the Life of Vacca tells us that only the first three books of the *Pharsalia* were by then published in the form we have them (if we ignore the minor dispute about the opening lines).¹⁷ No doubt he continued to work on the poem after the ban, and it was presumably then that he heightened the anti-Caesarian note to be found in the last three books of the epic. Dio of course may be rather compressing events for dramatic effect, and so making Lucan very busy in the last few months of his life. He was working on his epic, and he was also intriguing with the Pisonian conspirators. But before this, there is nothing implausible in Lucan's continuing to flourish – or only gradually falling into

¹⁵ Suet. *Vit. Lucani*.

¹⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 15,49; Dio 62,29,4.

¹⁷ See Rose 1966, 384. Significantly Nero, according to Dio 62,29,3, had in mind an historical epic of an even more ambitious kind.

disfavor – for two or three years after Seneca’s own downfall. After all, Nero was away in Achaea in 63 A.D., and there is no need to assume from Tacitus’ account that Petronius wrote the extant parts of the *Satyricon* immediately on his arrival at court.¹⁸ Even his unofficial position as *arbiter elegantiae* would hardly be built in a day, and Tigellinus, who had succeeded Burrus, did not look for an opportunity to be rid of him until 66 A.D.

Bearing Lucan’s career in mind we may now turn to the *Satyricon*.¹⁹ In ch. 118 of the *Satyricon*, Eumolpus criticizes those who turn their oratorical gifts to the supposedly easier channel of poetry, who indulge in idle *sententiae* in their writing, and who abandon the Vergilian machinery of the gods when writing historical epic. The criticism is clearly directed at Lucan: it fits him – and no one else we know of.²⁰ If we ask why Lucan is not named, we need not invoke the principle that fellow writers are not usually named in unfavorable contexts (although this is true enough), but in addition, the literary conventions of the *Satyricon* forbid it. How should picaresque characters wandering around South Italy be *au fait* with the latest literary developments in Rome? The *carmen de bello civili* that follows the critique draws heavily and unmistakably on Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, particularly the first three books. Except to dismiss the medieval and modern theory that it is a serious satire on Roman vices, we may leave aside here the exact nature of the relationship.²¹ But the implications are clearly critical. For the versification is more Vergilian, as Duckworth has recently shown,²² and back comes the Vergilian machinery of gods and goddesses that Lucan – not without good reasons – had seen fit to dispense with.

Petronius may have chosen to attack Lucan, a far longer established court figure than himself, for a number of reasons. Perhaps he wished to profit from the emperor’s growing jealousy of Lucan’s genius; perhaps to express a genuine distaste for Lucan’s epic experiments or his whole way of writing; perhaps from an instinctive Epicurean animosity against Seneca and those of the same philosophical persuasion, which he could gratify by attack-

¹⁸ Particularly in view of the length of the work; cf. Sullivan 1968, 34.

¹⁹ The *Satyricon* has been neglected as a *literary* document (though not in other ways) largely because of the long persistent doubts about its exact dating. Scholars were therefore unwilling to draw any but the most tentative and general deductions from it.

²⁰ Cf. the similar criticisms in Quint. *Inst.* 10,1,90; Mart. 14,194; Serv. *ad Aen.* 1,382; Schol. *ad Phars.* 1,1; Isid. *Orig.* 8,7,10.

²¹ See Sullivan 1968, 170 and the bibliography there cited.

²² Duckworth 1967, 106 n. 83.

ing their most prominent Stoic poet – for outside the *cohors amicorum*, Lucan had earlier enjoyed close relations with Persius and Annaeus Cornutus, the tragedian of the sect, and his continuing loyalty to his principles can hardly be doubted, despite the poltroonery of his last few days. It must be added, of course, to avoid foreclosing on any chronological mortgages, that Petronius' criticism of Lucan would be welcome to the emperor shortly after, as well as before, the poet's death.

The attack on Lucan, however, is an isolatable digression in the *Satyricon*; far more pervasive, and therefore integral to the work, is the allusion to, and frequently parody of, Seneca's prose and verse.²³ Objections have been raised to this interpretation of the many parallels between Seneca and Petronius on the grounds that two contemporary authors might easily allude, accidentally, to similar contemporary characters, issues, and philosophical commonplaces; alternatively, they may both drawing on common sources. But, if these parallels are accidental, we might reasonably expect them to be distributed over the whole corpus of Seneca's prose work. But if we exclude the *Apocolocyntosis*,²⁴ most of the parallels are with the *Epistulae morales*, a work which is among the latest of Seneca's writings, and which seems to have been published, several books at a time, in the last three years of his life. This period, of course, coincides with the postulated rise of Petronius to his unofficial position as Nero's *arbiter elegantiae*.

As for the objection, which can never be completely discounted, that the parallels between the two authors are due to their drawing, each for his very different purposes, on a common source (or sources), one can only reply that it is more plausible in the abstract than in the concrete. In the Neronian context it makes little sense. If we postulate some large mass of Stoic writing upon which Petronius and Seneca draw, then Petronius is casting too wide a net. As Collignon said, 'parodier tout le monde, c'est parodier personne.' Moreover, the parallels are not merely of thought or exemplary incident; in some of the most important cases, the resemblance is stylistic also. It is surely too much to imagine that other Stoics were writing in Seneca's unique style.

²³ See Studer 1843, 89; Gottschlich 1863, and the re-examination of the evidence in Collignon, 1892; Thomas, 1905, 11, 17; Gaselee, 1909; Schnur, 1957, 123; Rose, 1963, 205.

²⁴ The parallels between the *Satyricon* and the *Apocolocyntosis* are most fully tabulated by Bagnani 1954, 80. Their explanation, however, is to be sought in the Menippean and Varronian tradition.

The uses to which Petronius puts his Senecan material may be classified in three ways:²⁵ the first is straight parody, consisting of fairly long passages which read like a pastiche of Senecan prose. They concern such matters as the decadence of the age (*Sat.* 88),²⁶ the vanity of human wishes and man's subjugation to fortune (*Sat.* 115,8–9),²⁷ the uneasy conscience of the evildoer (*Sat.* 125,4).²⁸ They are revealed as parody by the ridiculous contexts in which they appear or by the disreputability of the characters that voice the sentiments. For instance, the lofty discourse on the age's decadence is put into the mouth of the pederastic poet Eumolpus just after he has told the scabrous, if amusing, story of his seduction of his host's son at Pergamum (*Sat.* 85 ff.).

The second classification (not to be too sharply distinguished from the first) is the dramatic use of Senecan material to throw scorn on its philosophical implications. This is generally found in the *Cena Trimalchionis*. A couple of examples will perhaps suffice. Seneca's famous *Epistle* 47 on the proper treatment of slaves makes several points: slaves are fellow-human beings; Fortune has the same power over masters and slaves; there is nothing wrong with dining with one's slaves, at least on a selective basis; and so on. In the *Cena*, Trimalchio's drunken invitation to his household to join the company at table (*Sat.* 70,10), his maudlin remarks about their common humanity despite their ill fortune: all make good literary sense as straight satire on a vulgar and pretentious freedman, but how much more point do they gain if we have Seneca's letter in mind? And Encolpius' disgust is here more heavily underlined and Trimalchio's bad taste more explicitly exposed than usual. Petronius in real life, incidentally, had no truck with this sort of egalitarianism. In his last hours he treated his slaves according to their deserts with either lashings or rewards (*Tac. Ann.* 16,19).

Again, Encolpius at *Sat.* 100 is extremely suspicious of Eumolpus' attitude towards Giton. He consoles himself with this piece of moralizing:

molestum est quod puer hospiti placet. quid autem non commune est quod natura optimum fecit? sol omnibus lucet. luna etiam feras ducit ad

²⁵ I omit here the poem on the Capture of Troy (*Sat.* 89), which is written in the meter and style of Senecan tragedy (see Sullivan 1968, 186 and Walsh, 1968, 210).

²⁶ Compare *Ep.* 115,10–12; *QN* 7,31,1ff.

²⁷ Cp. *Ep.* 92,34–35; 99,8–9, 31; 101,4,6.

²⁸ Cp. *Ep.* 105,7–8.

pabulum. quid aquis dici formosius potest? in publico tamen manant. solus ergo amor furtum potius quam praemium erit? immo vero nolo habere bona nisi quibus populus inviderit.

The parallel passage in Seneca, however, is completely serious (*Ep.* 73,6–8):

soli lunaeque plurimum debeo, et non uni mihi oriuntur; anno temperantique annum deo privatim obligatus sum, quamvis nihil in meum honorem <annua> descripta sint. stulta avaritia mortalium possessionem proprietatemque discernit nec quicquam suum credit esse quod publicum est; at ille sapiens nihil suum magis iudicat quam cuius illi cum humano genere consortium est, etc.

Encolpius' argument is, in fact, inconsistent and almost irrelevant, for he soon consoles himself with the thought that Eumolpus is too old to get up to any mischief without giving himself away. What could be the point of this little soliloquy in such a ridiculous and unseemly situation except parody?

The third type of parallel between Petronius and Seneca may explain why some scholars have been tempted to deny the theory of parody and fall back on the explanations of chance and common sources. These last instances cannot be construed as straight parody, stylistic or otherwise; they are rather a subtler deployment of Senecan themes and materials for other and more amusing purposes, in order to show Petronius' artistic superiority as well as his ironic rejection of Seneca's philosophical posturings and stylistic exuberance.²⁹ Just as the *Satyricon* is superior to the *Apocolocyntosis* as an experiment in Menippean satire, so Petronius takes material in which Seneca may be seen at his best, namely vivid satirical, or indignant, description, and turns it to quite different uses. The great portrait of Trimalchio, for example, is deliberately fleshed out with, among other things, much Senecan material – I would cite in particular Seneca's vignettes of Calvisius Sabinus, Pacuvius, and Maecenas in *Ep.* 27, 12, and 114.³⁰

²⁹ By comparison with Seneca, naturally, Petronius' style is Atticist, and his artistic *credo*, stressing simplicity, pleasure, and the acceptance of life as it is (expressed at *Sat.* 132,15), would be diametrically opposed to all that Seneca stood for in his life and writings.

³⁰ Significantly, Trimalchio's posthumously assumed *agnomen* is to be *Maecanatianus* (*Sat.* 71,12).

The intentions that underlie such a literary procedure are not unfamiliar in ancient authors: they provide a typical Graeco-Roman pleasure in the recognition of allusions; and further amusement from the radically changed context. This is indeed one of the main sources of Petronian humor, for which even the sacred stream of Vergil is tapped. In our Neronian context a certain invidious emulation would not be precluded. Petronius could show to what better use he could put even seriously intended material, while at the same time denigrating its strenuous moralism. Similar, but not identical, motives were at work in his rehandling of the early part of the *Pharsalia*. Had Petronius' dealings with Seneca been merely conventional parody of the sort one finds even in the *Apocolocyntosis*, with its satire on poetic ways of telling the time in ch. 2, there might have been less doubt about the date and intentions of the *Satyricon*, but the sophistication of Petronius' methods in using contemporary material confused the issue.³¹ There is a wealth of contemporary allusion in the *Cena* in particular, and literary material drawn from contemporary sources is indeed utilized, but there is no *one* way or *one* purpose at work, and no *one* person under attack in each characterization. With this in mind, a more convincing explanation might be offered of some of the shorter poems in the *Cena*, and perhaps even of that puzzling insertion, the *Troiae halosis* in ch. 88.³² The most likely purpose of Petronius' poem was to parody Seneca's tragic style, and lines 406–457 of the *Agamemnon* may be recommended for comparison. The *Troiae halosis* contains a number of Seneca's favorite words, a fair proportion of verbally pointed *sententiae*, and is also very tolerant of repetition. It has not, of course, been uncommon to date the composition of the tragedies to Seneca's exile in Corsica, perhaps out of a pious wish to fill in his time profitably, but there is no concrete dating evidence as there is with some of the prose works, and he could just as well have written some or all of them after his return. His ac-

³¹ Against the early theories of direct parody and satire – of Nero in Trimalchio, of Seneca in Eumolpus, which were clearly untenable in such crude form – a reaction set in that flatly denied such contemporary references and so led to the extreme aberrations on the dating of the *Satyricon* put forward by Marmorale and his followers.

³² It is unlikely that this is a parody of Lucan's *Iliad*, an early work, which was probably written in hexameters. And although we cannot entirely exclude the possibility that the theme was chosen because of one of Nero's own compositions, such as the poem on the destruction of Troy which he recited while Rome burned in 64 A.D. (Tac. *Ann.* 15,19; Dio 62,18,1), yet this does seem rather a dangerous game even for one as apparently insolent as Petronius.

users did charge him with writing more verse Nero developed an interest in it, and Nero was especially interested in dramatic recitation and performances.³³

So far we have examined the evidence from the *Satyricon* for a literary feud between the rising – or now established – arbiter of elegance and the two most important writers of the court circle, Lucan and Seneca. But was the feud one-sided? We do not know, unfortunately, the content of Lucan's libelous poem of 65 A.D. against the emperor and the most powerful of his friends, although it is unlikely that Petronius was overlooked.³⁴ Seneca's oblique response, however, seems to have survived. In *Ep.* 122 there is a sustained tirade on the *turba lucifugarum*, who turn night into day with their lengthy potations. Seneca attacks at length their material luxury, their desire for notoriety, their eagerness to appear different, the elaborate elegance of their table and their way of life, although as is customary, only names from the past are cited. The description squares very closely with Tacitus' account of Petronius' elegance, luxury, and his turning night into day.³⁵ Significant also is that in these later letters Seneca suddenly adopts a hostile tone towards Epicureanism in general, in sharp contrast to his earlier sympathetic references to Epicurean doctrine in the first three books of the letters.³⁶

The last piece of evidence is even more hypothetical. It consists of certain epigrams from the poetic corpus attributed, on various grounds, to Seneca and now in the *Anthologia Latina* (396ff).³⁷ Some of these poems clearly belong to his exile, but his poetic activity was not limited to this period, as we know from Tacitus (*Ann.* 14,52). The arbitrary collocation and

³³ Supposedly he composed a tragedy (Philostr. *Vit. Apoll.* 4,39); he played in tragedies to the end of his life (Dio 62,22,5–6). Although appearances on stage such as those of Piso (Tac. *Ann.* 15,65), other prominent citizens (Dio 62,17,2, for the *Ludi Maximi*), and the emperor himself (Suet. *Nero* 11) were looked down on, the writing of plays was popular, as is clear from the survival of Seneca's own tragedies, the slightly later *Octavia*, and the evidence for Cornutus' plays and a *praetexta* from the pen of Persius (Suet. *Vit. Pers.*).

³⁴ Cf. Suet. *Vit. Lucani: sed et famoso carmine cum ipsum tum potentissimos amicorum gravissime proscindit.*

³⁵ See Faider 1921, 15.

³⁶ For Petronius' Epicureanism (or at least the sophisticated Roman interpretation of it), see Tacitus' description, Petronius' artistic *credo* at *Sat.* 132,15, Raith 1963, and Sullivan 1968, 98. The hostile references in the *Letters to Lucilius* include *Ep.* 88,5 and 123,10–11.

³⁷ See, most recently, Prato 1964 and the bibliography there given.

dislocation of various groups of epigrams³⁸ lead one to surmise that they were anthologized perhaps from all the four books which Priscian (*lib.* 7,759) mentions as comprising Seneca's poetic *oeuvre*. Of the epigrams attacking personal enemies, some seem appropriate to the period in Corsica, but others (notably 412 and 416) read as though Seneca is in a position to be undermined rather than cherishing a remote hope of returning from exile, and these may therefore belong to a later period. The two poems in question are complaints of the malicious, if witty, backbiting of an enemy. One (416) is addressed to a certain Maximus, no doubt a fictitious name, who has been injuring Seneca's reputation:

*famam temptasti nostram sermone maligno
laedere fellitis, invidiose, iocis.*

More interesting for our purposes is 412, for the enemy invoked here is not only verbally malignant, but he writes satirical poems as well:

*carmina mortifero tua sunt suffusa veneno,
at sunt carminibus pectora nigra magis.*

One wonders whether this enemy's name also was a black as his heart. Was Seneca covertly alluding to T. Petronius Niger? Certainly the description might suit him:

bellus homo es? valide capitalia crimina ludis.

We cannot of course make too much of all this, but the epigrams at least confirm that literary feuds, or rather quarrels carried on in verse, were a feature of court life in Seneca's time, and that he suffered from them.

This then is the evidence for a not unexpected literary (and personal) feud between Nero's newer friends and his old Stoic counselor, Seneca, and those such as Lucan who would align themselves with him. Petronius seems to have been for a time the victor (*Tac. Ann.* 16,18: *dum nihil amoenum et molle affluentia putat, nisi quod ei Petronius approbavisset*), until he himself

³⁸ For example, 432 (on Cato) seems to belong with the short cycle on the same subject, 397, 398, and is one of several unexpected interruptions in the sequence of erotic poems, 427–439.

fell to the more unscrupulous machinations of Tigellinus. All this, if accepted in principle, has some implications for the relative chronology of Neronian literature, but, more importantly, it has relevance for our interpretation of the *Satyricon* itself. We may, for example, almost rule out the moralistic accounts of the *Satyricon* offered by such very different critics as Gilbert Highet and William Arrowsmith.³⁹ The *Satyricon* is not, as they respectively argue, an Epicurean tract advocating the quiet life of *ataraxia* by means of amusing and horrendous examples, nor yet a surgical exposé of all that was rotten in Neronian society in the manner of *The Waste Land*.⁴⁰ The *Satyricon* was a work written for the amusement of the Neronian literary circle; it pandered to the tastes and snobbisms of that group; and relied on its literary sophistications for appreciation. When morality lifts its head in the *Satyricon*, it turns out to be a parody of moralizing, whose implications are properly ‘placed’ by contextual irony. Even apparently serious passages which might chime with the author’s own views – chs. 1–5, for example, on contemporary rhetorical training – should be scrutinized for parody, humor, and even less commendable motives. Some of the themes derided by Encolpius are very like those to be found in the Elder Seneca’s handbooks.

It would seem then that taste, style, and wit in literature and art are Petronius’ positives, not morality or philosophy. Such a work would not commend itself to Seneca, but neither would the character and style of the life the author. The real miracle, however, is that a work such as the *Satyricon*, so rooted in the life, literature, and intrigues of its times, could, by its superior style and artistry, impress later generations as almost a timeless work,⁴¹ a *ktêma es aei* rather than the *agônisma es to parachrêma* it was partly intended to be.

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³⁹ See Highet 1941 and Arrowsmith 1966.

⁴⁰ Eliot’s epigraph for the *The Waste Land*, take from the *Cena*, is fortuitously misleading.

⁴¹ It has been attributed to periods ranging from the reign of Augustus to the reign of Galienus.

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