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## IS THERE A PARODY BETWEEN SENECA AND PETRONIUS?

*This article concentrates predominantly on relationship between the two men of letters—Petronius and Seneca – living in the period of Emperor Nero’s reign. I shall attempt to provide an overview of common features appearing in the works of both authors, but I would particularly like to maintain that connection between Seneca and Petronius ran much deeper than might have seemed at the time and that it concerned not only Petronius’s work Satyricon and Seneca’s Apocolocyntosis but also other Seneca’s works (e.g. Epistulae morales ad Lucilium).*

**Keywords:** Petronius, Seneca, Nero, Trimalchio, Maecenas, Parody.

Seneca and Petronius are close to each other by the virtue of their literary themes utilised by both men in the above mentioned literary works<sup>1</sup>, and they also share similar life stories, at least to the extent that the preserved records would have us believe. Seneca’s life has been sufficiently studied and is therefore well known to all contemporary scholars. Nonetheless, there are doubts and scarcity of reliable records regarding the life of Petronius.

Seneca most likely lived in the same society and shared the same environment as Petronius. Also he enjoyed comparable status at the Emperor’s court to that of his successor – Petronius. Hence it may be assumed that he was dealing with the same people, not to mention the emperor Nero himself, who appears to be the main link between the two men. Both men were familiar with authors and writers of their time, both were affected by the contemporary political scene and responded to philosophical notions. Therefore, I dare look upon Petronius’s work from the same perspective

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<sup>1</sup> I.e. particularly in *Satyricon* and *Apocolocyntosis*.

as when perceiving Seneca's work, i.e. I take into account political scene, philosophical principle and rhetorical way of thinking of that era.<sup>2</sup>

The basic literary sources for both men are reports by historians Tacitus,<sup>3</sup> Suetonius,<sup>4</sup> and Dion Cassius.<sup>5</sup> Many reports about his life are provided by Seneca himself<sup>6</sup> and as far as Petronius is concerned, there is a preserved reference in the work of Pliny the Elder<sup>7</sup> and Plutarch.<sup>8</sup> An invaluable evidence facilitating explanation of mutual status enjoyed by both men at the Emperor's court and their respective relationship to each other is a discovered piece of plate found in Herculaneum,<sup>9</sup> the existence of which is conveyed to us by Carratelli's article titled "Tabulae Ceratae Herculaneses." The plate is instrumental in dating Petronius's consulate to around 62 BC.

In the beginning of the second chapter of her publication titled *Theatre at the Times of Nero and Seneca (Divadlo za časů Nerona a Seneky)* Eva Stehliková ponders a question "Why did Petronius pass up an opportunity to mock the greatest author of tragedy of the Emperor's age? He was undoubtedly personally acquainted to him and it is therefore implausible that he did not read his treatises, or hear or see his plays."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps Petronius failed to target Seneca's tragedies as such, but otherwise I doubt that Petronius missed an opportunity to parody Seneca and, referring to Sullivan's article<sup>11</sup> in publication *Authors, Authority, and Interpretation in the Ancient Novel*, I am inclined to share the author's premise that Petronius parodies Seneca in several ways simultaneously.

J.P. Sullivan<sup>12</sup> mentions three ways whereby Petronius parodies Seneca. The first type is a direct parody, made up of relatively long passages of text forming a pastiche of Seneca's prose.<sup>13</sup> The second way is Petroni-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. RUDICH (1997: Seneca).

<sup>3</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12–15 (Seneca); Tac. *Ann.* 16,17–20 (Petronius).

<sup>4</sup> Suet. *De vita Caesarum*, 5 (Claudius).

<sup>5</sup> Dion Cass. *Historia Romana*, 60 (Claudius), 61 (Nero).

<sup>6</sup> Sen. *Ep. Ad Helviam matrem de consolatione*.

<sup>7</sup> Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 37, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Plutarch. *Mor.* 60d–e.

<sup>9</sup> Tab. Herc. Ins. V no. 22; see CARRATELI (1946: 381).

<sup>10</sup> STEHLÍKOVÁ (2005: 33): "It is a mystery which seems the greater given the fact that Petronius, using parody, settles accounts with Lucan, the author of historic epic about civil war *Pharsalia*, *Pharsalia's Field*, and also with Seneca's nephew."

<sup>11</sup> „Petronius, Seneca and Lucan: A Neronian Literary Feud?“, reprinted again in 2006 in honour of G. L. Schmeling.

<sup>12</sup> SULLIVAN (2006: 310n).

<sup>13</sup> Petr. *Sat.* 88; 115,8–9;125,4.

us's dramatic rendering of Seneca's themes in his work *Satyricon*, heaping scorn on Seneca's philosophical importance, and finally, the third way lies in thoughtful stylistic rearrangement of Seneca's motifs and themes, so as to demonstrate his own literary merits, as well as his ironic dismissal of Seneca's philosophical prose and stylistic embellishments.

Sullivan himself concedes rather blurry distinction between the first two methods of Petronius's parody. What is more relevant, perhaps, is the fact that the latter type may be found predominantly in *Cena Trimalchionis*. This part of *Satyricon*, as well as a well-known Seneca's letter about slaves, addresses the issue of slaves' status in society. Whereas Seneca's thoughts on this matter are to be taken seriously („*Servi sunt*. “ *Immo homines*. „*Servi sunt*. “ *Immo contubernales*. „*Servi sunt*. “ *Immo humiles amici*. „*Servi sunt*. “ *Immo conservi, si cogitaveris tantundem in utrosque licere fortunae*.),<sup>14</sup> the passage from *Cena* mocks and ridicules them in an overt dramatic fashion (*Amici, inquit et servi homines sunt et aequae unum lactem biberunt, etiam si illos malus fatus oppresserit. Tamen me salvo cito acquam liberam gustabunt*).<sup>15</sup>

There is no doubt that Seneca's thoughts are meant seriously, whereas in Petronius we may be sure that whenever similar words are uttered by the host Trimalchio, they cannot be taken at their face value. What is more, when recollecting an earlier comic scene, where slave disguised as Dionysus naturally interprets his master's Trimalchio's words „*Dionyse, liber esto!*”<sup>16</sup> In his favour as liberation from slavery, Trimalchio's cruel inhumane treatment of slaves becomes obvious (explicitly in chapter 34,5). The irony lies in the fact that Trimalchio did not set his slave free but merely ordered him to portray a god Bacchus.<sup>17</sup> It is in the light of this comic scene that we must interpret the host's words in chapter 71, and namely as an ironical joke, whereby Petronius' solemn and dramatic tone mocks Seneca's words.

The most intriguing and possibly the most intricate type of parody is Sullivan's third type. Petronius incorporates into his work the most penetrating thoughts by Seneca only to alter their meaning by clever rearrangement in the text.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 47.

<sup>15</sup> Petr. *Sat.* 71,1; further cf. Petr. *Sat.* 70,10; further cf. SULLIVAN 2006, 310n.

<sup>16</sup> Petr. *Sat.* 41,7.

<sup>17</sup> Petronius' joke lies in a double meaning of the word 'liber' = 'free,' Liber = a nickname of Dionysus = Bacchus.

<sup>18</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 27,12 a 114 cf. Petr. *Sat.* 71,12 : „*C. Pompeius Trimalchio Maecenatianus hic requiescit. Huic seviratus absenti decretus est. Cum posset in omnibus deciriis*

According to Sullivan,<sup>19</sup> an existence of fierce rivalry between Seneca and Petronius may not be ruled out. Petronius might have been motivated to gain an edge over his rival and perhaps smear the persistent moralist at Nero's court, while, at the same time, displaying how much better than his rival he is at exploiting even serious literary theme. These Sullivan's thoughts correspond to polemics (Rudich and others) about the seriousness on one hand and comicality on the other, of thoughts in Petronius's work coated in irony, sarcasm and parody, leading to the question of who was the greater moralist of the two – Petronius or Seneca.

Just as Petronius parodied Seneca, it is reasonable to assume that there are analogical instances of Seneca parodying Petronius.

The presumption of Seneca's parody of Petronius arises when comparing Seneca's description of Maecenas in his work *Epistulae morales*<sup>20</sup> with Petronius's Trimalchio.

It is obvious that both authors' works feature more than one character susceptible to intentional parody. I shall commence by looking at Trimalchio and Maecenas. The similarities between the two characters are the most convincing due to Petronius's direct reference to Maecenas's name.<sup>21</sup> Both share uncanny appearance<sup>22</sup> and uncharacteristic interest in death. According to Seneca Maecenas displays an effeminate fear of death,<sup>23</sup> whereas Trimalchio is presented by Petronius as a reasonable self-possessed man, who is aware of death and therefore can duly prepare for it. It is striking, though, how often Trimalchio brings up the subject of death in conversation. Initially, he derides tragic death by sarcastic remarks,<sup>24</sup> later; however, he strives to arrange for a lavish funeral and everything else necessary for

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*Romae esse, tamen noluit. Pius, forte, fidelis, ex parvo crevit, sestertium reliquit trecenties, nec unquam philosophum audivit. Vale. – Et tu. “; further cf. SULLIVAN 2006, 311.*

<sup>19</sup> SULLIVAN (2006: 312).

<sup>20</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 114,4: *Quomodo Maecenas vixerit notius est quam ut narrari nunc debeat quomodo ambulaverit, quam delicatus fuerit, quam cupierit videri, quam vitia sua latere noluerit. Quid ergo? non oratio eius aequae soluta est quam ipse discinctus? non tam insignita illius verba sunt quam cultus, quam comitatus, quam domus, quam uxor?.*

<sup>21</sup> Petr. *Sat.* 71,12.

<sup>22</sup> Petr. *Sat.* 32,2: *pallio enim coccineo adrasum excluserat caput; Ep.* 114,6: *sic adparuerit, ut pallio velaretur caput exclusis utrimque aureus.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ep.* 101: *Inde illud Maecenatis turpissimum votum quo et debilitatem non recusat et deformitatem et novissime acutam crucem, dummodo inter haec mala spiritus prorogetur.*

<sup>24</sup> Petr. *Sat.* 72,1: *haec ut dixit Trimalchio, flere coepit uberte; flebat et Fortunata, flebat*

an after-life, as if to reassure himself that death is not the ultimate end of everything. The importance ascribed by Petronius via his character's words to death is the more striking by the fact, that gravestone is the highlights of conversation between him and the invited guests and the whole reception terminates by a feigned funeral. The fact, that Trimalchio chose for his gravestone a nickname "Maecenatianus" is Petronius' intentional reference to the Augustus's minister.

B. Baldwin<sup>25</sup> illustrates that Trimalchio's poetry bears many similarities to a few other preserved fragments<sup>26</sup> of Maecenas's poetry<sup>27</sup> and in his article "Trimalchio and Maecenas" he disproves Smith's view<sup>28</sup> that Petronius parodied Varron.<sup>29</sup> According to Baldwin<sup>30</sup> the more telling is comparison of Trimalchio's maxim about the brevity of life<sup>31</sup> with the same subject cited by Seneca.<sup>32</sup>

Attached to the above-mentioned facts is another hypothesis, that Petronius might have recognized himself in Seneca's Maecenas,<sup>33</sup> which could have given rise to mutual parody between the two authors, as is maintained by S. N. Byrne.<sup>34</sup>

If we were to sum up all the pros and cons, we may draw analogy between Petronius and Maecenas as far as their political status and living conditions are concerned but there is a stark mismatch between the two as far as Petronius' status of a stylist is concerned. G. Schmelling<sup>35</sup> mentions Petronius's language and style and applauds its simplicity which in itself

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*et Habinnas, tota denique familia, tamquam in funus rogata, lamentatione triclinium implevit.*

25 BALDWIN (1984: 402n).

26 LUNDERSTEDT (1911).

27 Cf. Petr. *Sat.* 55,5n, Isidore *Etym.* 19,32,6; see BALDWIN (1984: 402n).

28 SMITH (1975: 68n).

29 BALDWIN (1984: 402): „I think Smith is on the right lines here. However, he may have the wrong candidate. Maecenas would fit the bill better than Varro.“

30 BALDWIN (1984: 402n).

31 Petr. *Sat.* 34,10: *ergo vivamus, dum licet esse bene.*

32 Sen. *Ep.* 101,11: *vita dum superest, bene est.*

33 Sen. *Ep.* 114,4: ***non tam insignita illius verba sunt quam cultus, quam comitatus, quam domus, quam uxor? Magni vir ingenii fuerat si illud egisset via rectiore, si non vitasset intellegi, si non etiam in oratione diffunderet.***

34 BYRNE (2006: 102).

35 SCHMELLING (1996: 474): „A great virtue of Petronius, it seems to me, is his ability to say everything simply, which makes his language appeal healthy and in touch with the living, spoken language.“

makes Petronius exempt from Seneca's mockery, directed instead at Maecenas for his pompous style.<sup>36</sup>

Another potential analogy may be drawn between Seneca's Maecenas and the emperor Nero, which is only natural given the fact that I also compare Trimalchio with Nero and find Trimalchio to be an abundant source of allusions to the emperor, as least as far as his conduct at the court is concerned. Both characters – Nero and Maecenas – had passion for literature, in particular for the art of poetry. Common denominator between the two is their use of metaphors and love for affectation.

Thoughts about possible parodies are intriguing but rather complex and as such are in need of classification. On one side there is Trimalchio, assuming a nickname Maecenas. Trimalchio represents a caricature of not only a real Maecenas but also a fictional character called Maecenas depicted by Seneca. Trimalchio exhibits similarities with the emperor Nero. On the other side there is also Seneca's Maecenas who undeniably bears resemblance to the real Maecenas but also to the real emperor Nero.

From the above described features the following relationships may be drawn. Petronius, by the virtue of his character Trimalchio may have parodied the Emperor Augustus's Maecenas or emperor Nero or Seneca himself by imitating Seneca's literary character. In similar way, Seneca, via his character of Maecenas may have criticised the personality of Augustus's Maecenas thereby parodying Nero or Petronius himself.

**Table of comparison:**

Author of parody	Literary character, through which the parody takes place	Person affected by the parody/person being the subject of parody
Petronius	Trimalchio	Maecenas
		Nero
		Seneca's Maecenas (indirect parody of Seneca)
		Seneca
Seneca	Maecenas	Maecenas
		Nero
		Trimalchio (indirect parody of Petronius)
		Petronius

<sup>36</sup> Sen. *Ep.*114,21: *qui lacernas coloris inprobi sumunt, qui perlucetent togam, qui nolunt facere quicquam quod hominum oculis transire liceat: iritant illos et in se avertunt, volunt vel reprehendi dum conspici. Talis est oratio Maecenatis...*, see also COURTNEY (1993: 276–281) – for Maecenas' poetry; ANDRÉ (1983: 1765–1787) and BARDON (1949: 163–178) – generally for pro Maecenas' writing.

The table suggests that there are two possible levels of parody: One represented by Petronius mocking Seneca through his character of Trimalchio and the other represented by Seneca caricaturing Petronius via “his” Maecenas. It is very likely that both contemporary writers, being rivals in the matters political and general influence at the emperor’s court, may as well have led a dispute on the literary battlefield, the more so since they were both men of letters.

As far as Nero’s depiction in the literary accounts is concerned, I suppose, it is present both in Petronius and Seneca. The personality of the Emperor Nero was very intriguing and his behaviour and conduct so eccentric, that it attracted both positive and negative attention of the literary field.<sup>37</sup> The existence of Petronius’s parody of Seneca is beyond doubt, as least as far as some parts of his *Satyricon*<sup>38</sup> are concerned (i.e. *Satyricon*, chapter 71). On the other hand it is far more challenging to prove the existence of Seneca’s parody of Petronius.

According to S. N. Byrne<sup>39</sup> it is not merited to hesitate to disclose Seneca’s parody of Petronius since we do not even know, whether Seneca knew about the existence of *Satyricon* and its contents at all. If Seneca desired to oppose criticism directed against him (*Tac. Ann.* 14, 52) it is immaterial, whether he was acquainted with *Satyricon* or not.

Byrne’s assumption about negative character traits of representatives of Nero’s court corresponds to Seneca’s profile – author moralist. It is very plausible that Seneca knew Petronius and observed his conduct at the emperor’s court and therefore it is not relevant whether he was also acquainted with his *Satyricon* or not.

Seneca’s criticism of Petronius may have constituted a certain challenge for the latter, since he promptly endowed his character of Trimalchio with personality denigrating Seneca.<sup>40</sup> Granted that Petronius recognised Seneca’s conduct, it comes as no surprise that we encounter simultaneously several types of parody of Seneca in Petronius’ works. The first two types – direct parody and dramatic use of Seneca’s literary themes – are completed

<sup>37</sup> Cf. SCHMELLING (1996: 208): „The story has many elements of a Hollywood extravaganza: Nero, orgies, marble, halls of power on the Palatine and in the Forum, riotous banquets, nude dancing girl, sexual excesses...“, cf. also VESSEY (1991–1993: 149). As a classical wag has recently noted, Petronius would lose much glamour and appeal had written under Vespasian.“ See SCHMELLING (1996: 208).

<sup>38</sup> Petr. *Sat.* 71.

<sup>39</sup> BYRNE (2006: 103n); further cf.: „Maecenas embodied the qualities that Seneca would have most detested in these men, including an affected literary style.“

<sup>40</sup> ROSE (1971: 46 and 69–74): dates the passage *Cena* back to years 64–65 AD., which corresponds to Seneca’s *Epistulae*; see BYRNE (2006: 106).



by third type, whereby Petronius cleverly rearranges Seneca's thoughts in his work, as a response to Seneca's moralizing aimed not only at others but also, as is evident, at Petronius himself.<sup>41</sup>

If we accede to the fact that Petronius is perceived as a personality not preoccupied with trivialities, but instead as a person capable of keeping a sense of proportion and having a fondness for eccentricity and otherness, it may be expected that being likened to Maecenas – Augustus's advisor and influential friend – albeit with malicious intent, may have flattered him to a certain extent. Just as Maecenas was an artistic guide to the emperor Augustus, so was Petronius an *arbiter elegantiae* at the Emperor Nero's court.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> No doubt Petronius's response to Seneca's parody is reflected in the first two types (see SULLIVAN 2006), however, the third type representing a sophisticated rearrangement of Seneca's literary themes, was cunningly concealed by Petronius yet cleverly exposed to the more perceptive reader.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. BYRNE (2006: 107): The few readers today who notice that Seneca is basically the only source for negative information about Maecenas assume that Seneca came to despise Maecenas out of emulation, envy, or plain bitterness, but we should at least entertain the possibility that Maecenas was not the principal victim of Seneca's abuse at all.

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## RESUMÉ

V příspěvku se pokouším shrnout podobné jevy vyskytující se u obou autorů, zejména chci ale ukázat, že propojení mezi Senekou a Petroniem bylo daleko hlubší, než by se mohlo zdát, a týkalo se nejenom Petroniova spisu *Satyricon* a Senekova díla *Apocolocyntosis*, ale i dalších Senekových prací. Je zřejmé, že u Seneky a Petronia existovalo více osob, které byly záměrně parodovány. Není vyloučené, že součástí parodické hry se stali i oba autoři.

