

## THE EMPEROR NERO IN DIALOGS BY PETRARCH, EPIGRAPHS AND WOODCUTS TO THEM OF THE REFORMATION EPOCH: GENERAL AND SPECIAL IN PERCEPTION

**N. I. Devyataykina, PhD**

*Abstract: The paper considers the character of Nero as it is represented in the famous treatise “De remediis utriusque fortunae” - "Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul" (1354-1366) by Italian Renaissance humanist and expert Ancient scholar Petrarch (1304-1374). Nero appears in 19 dialogues as a ruler, person and exemplar. The paper comments on historical, political and cultural priorities of Petrarch as revealed through his use of Nero character. The article is also largely based on the analysis of woodcuts (1520-1521) by German Master of Petrarch and epigraphs to dialogues (1529-1531) by German Reformation poet Pinicianus. The paper demonstrates that the Master of Petrarch does not just illustrate Petrarch's texts, but rather re-thinks them, accentuating in his sharp graphics what was relevant and urgent for his period. Pinicianus uses the same strategy, concentrating on moral and religious problems. Both German interpreters of Petrarch use simple language, folklore images and folk wisdom, the realities of their period, substitute philosophical speculation by material talk, and create their own ‘portrait’ of Nero.*

*Keywords: Nero, the perception of Renaissance text, Petrarch, Pinicianus, Master of Petrarch*

Petrarch's (1304 – 1374) place in European culture rests mainly on his “Canzoniere” – a book of verse in Italian, containing 366 sonnets and songs inspired by Laura's beauty. In recent decades his poetry competes for scholars' attention with Petrarch's Latin writings, which came under close scrutiny from literary scholars and historians from around the world [3], as well as from Russia (R.I. Khlodovsky, V.V. Bibikhin, E.G. Rabinovitch, L.M. Lukyanova, N.V. Revyakina, L.M. Batkin, N.I. Devyataikina, et al.) [2].

Currently, the predominant approach to Petrarch's humanism departs from the conviction that his writings, taken *as a whole*, defined “the configuration of Renaissance as a type of culture” (M.L. Andreyev) [1, p.538]. The dialogues from Petrarch's main treatise – “De remediis utriusque fortunae” (“Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul”, 1354-1366) allow us to add that Petrarch's *oeuvre* is also an important crossroads, the meeting-point between Renaissance and Reformation, Italy and Germany. The treatise was highly popular in German-speaking lands, especially during the Reformation. In the 1880-s, American scholar W. Fiske listed 94 editions of the treatise both in Latin and in translation, with significant share of German translations (print-runs of 1532, 1539, 1545, 1551, 1559, 1572, 1584, 1596, 1604, 1620) [5]. Today, both in Europe and in Russia, notwithstanding the appearance of new translations, the treatise is not sufficiently known to wide readership. Much less known are the epigraphs to the treatise by Pinicianus, written in 1529-1531 [6]. Pinicianus was a German poet, clergyman, grammarian and translator, who supported the Reformation. In the period of his life that is of interest here, he was linked to the city of Augsburg, the site of first editions of Petrarch's treatise, the text adorned by specially commissioned epigraphs and woodcuts. [10, 11] To our knowledge, so far the woodcuts by Master of Petrarch, who worked in the early 1520-s, was a vehement critic of Catholicism and Pope's power [4], have never attracted scholarly attention. The paper aims to analyze the situations in which Nero appears in the dialogues, what comments his figure elicits, how it functions for the formulation of humanist ideas, what was Pinicianus and Master of Petrarch's reaction to ‘dialogues with Nero’.

Under what circumstances Petrarch mentions Nero? It is worth noting that he wrote the treatise at the height of his literary career, in the language that is accessible and highly expressive. The treatise was meant for everyday reading. It contains a multitude of names and examples, proverbs and adages. The treatise demonstrates the author's great interest in Greek and Roman antiquity, especially in the Roman period – its heroes, politicians, rulers, philosophers, writers, poets, literary characters, its gods and mythological characters.. In 254 dialogues of the treatise, 320 Roman names are mentioned; the frequency of their usage is irregular throughout the book – from 1-2 names to over 50 per dialogue. Romans are mentioned mostly in the Book I of the treatise, which discusses the happy life; they figure less in Book II, about the unhappy fortune [8]. Two tables give the idea of the place that Nero (37-68, Emperor in 54-68) holds in the treatise, alongside other Roman characters.

Table 1. Book I dialogues featuring Nero: titles

	Number in the book	Latin title	English title
1	XV	Depatriagloriosa	A glorious native country
2	XXIII	De dulcedine musica	Sweet music
3	XXXVIII	De gemmarum poculis	On precious cups
4	LII	De amico unico et fideli	A faithful friend
5	LIV	De inventione aurifodine	On discovering gold
6	LXXV	De optimo genero	On wonderful son-in-law
7	LXXIX	De filiis adoptivis et privignis	On adoption
8	LXXXI	De insigni discipulo	A remarkable pupil
9	XCV	De occupata tyranide	Seizing a lordship
10	XCVI	De regno et imperio	Kingship and empire
11	CX.	De hereditatis expectatione	On expecting the inheritance
12	CXIV	De filii vel amici expectatione	On waiting for a son or a friend
13	CXVIII	De Gloria ex edificiis sperata	On the hope to gain glory through one's buildings

Table 2. Book II dialogues, featuring Nero: titles

	Number in the book	Latin title	English title
1	IX	De damno passo	On loss of property
2	XXII	De uxore sterili	On infertile wife
3	XXXIX	De iniusto domino	On unfair ruler
4	LXIII	De habitatione angusta	On incapacious dwelling
5	LXXIX	De amisso regno	On the loss of king's power
6	LXXXI	De amissa tyrannide	On the loss of tyranny

It is easy to see that Petrarch finds reasons to name Nero in every thirteenth dialogue, almost twice as often in Book I in comparison to Book II. The dialogues in the tables treat different topics. All of them are written as dialogues between two allegorical characters – Reason and Joy in Book I, Reason and Sorrow in Book II. They discuss in detail the following problems of general concern to early humanism: true/false glory, friendship and interests, hobbies, wealth and what is today called the conspicuous consumption, family and family dynamics, what constitutes a fair (ideal) ruler or tyrant. None of the dialogues is completely devoted to Nero, neither to any other historical figure. The Roman emperor is of interest to Petrarch 'anthropologically'; he presents Nero as a man, a person, in all manifestations of his public and

private conduct. Only five dialogues from the lists are of political nature, and these still present Nero as a man.

Within the paper limits we cannot fully analyze all the dialogues, so we take only three or four. Let's start with the problem of glory. It has been long established that for Petrarch, glory was one of the central problems, running through his writings of all periods; there are several dialogues on glory in the treatise under consideration. Petrarch's main thesis on glory, illustrated by huge number of examples, is that glory rests exclusively on personal acts, in any field; its source is personal virtue-valor; glory is the shadow of virtue; glory is kept up in eternity by poets, who write about men worthy of glory. According to Petrarch, ignominy, dishonor is also the result of person's acts, never an ancestral or social stigma. In the dialogue "De patria gloriosa" (A glorious native country. I.15), the first in the treatise mentioning Nero, the humanist offers many examples to support the idea that no illustrious place of birth can impart glory on a person, while a man can impart glory on the most humble place of birth. Nero is used here in the context of social aspects of glory: for those like him, "born at the top of the world", their great birthplace is a factor contributing to their "dishonor known to the whole world", the birthplace increases their ignominy [8, p.72]. In the first dialogue Nero serves as a negative example and warning, and glory understood as being known to next generations can turn to be great dishonor, the synonym for horrible crimes and shame.

It has been long shown that his materials on Nero Petrarch took from Suetonius's (c. 69 – after 122 AD) "The Lives of the Twelve Caesars", which he knew very well, as evidenced by Petrarch's free use of facts and direct quotes from Suetonius in wide variety of texts [9]. The first part of Suetonius narrative of Nero stresses his positive qualities and the promise he showed in early youth. Suetonius writes about Nero's classical education, high birth, finesse, his many gifts, including acting talent; physical attractiveness; about the great scale of his plans for future (9.Neron.20). Petrarch's dialogues do not mention any of these; he only cites Nero's self-characterization as a great actor. The fact shows that Petrarch chose his materials and accentuated them in accordance with his humanistic belief that intelligence, education, talents and eloquence are made worthy only in conjunction with virtue.

Pinician's epigraph to the dialogue "De patria gloriosa" underlines for the reader the importance of contemplation of soul's eternal, heavenly 'patria'. [7,S.11]. The woodcut depicts a German city on fire, its defenders dead on its walls – a picture of Reformation's atrocities [7, S.12]. Both the epigraph and the woodcut far depart from the contents of the dialogue, but they speak directly to the German contemporaries of Petrarch's "co-authors".

As might be expected, the figure of Nero appears in the dialogue "De dulcedine musica" (Sweet music. I.23). Petrarch here reasons on the importance and value of music, argues for its chaste and moderate pursue, recalls the singing of angels in heaven; the dialogue closes with author agreeing with Plato's opinion on the importance of music for the morals of the state. The humanist draws several Greek and Roman examples (Arion, Domitian, Themistocles, Epaminondas, Alcibiades, Caligula). Nero comes the last on this list, and is given the longest author's comment: "It's hard to imagine how much effort Nero put into his cittern skills, and to what extent he took care of his voice. And, what's most stupid and ludicrous, on his last night, the first night that allowed his people to make a break in fearing and breathe a little, – among his pleas, coming from the direct danger of death, whining all the time, he lamented not the fall of the great princeps, but the death of the great musician" [8, p.122]. Petrarch's words combine irony, sarcastic ridicule, and his characteristic word-play: the contrast of 'the last – the first' is used here to express the attitude to Nero as to a ruler, whose death had been looked forward to in the hope that it would stop the sequence of terrible crimes and abominations.

Pinicianus in the epigraph to this dialogue draws the reader's attention to Petrarch's opinion on the relaxing influence of music:

*Enervant animos cythara cantusque lyraque  
et vox et numeris bracchia mota suis.*[7, S.22]

(Souls find relaxation in cittern and singing to lyra,  
Rhythm, harmonious tune, languid shoulder movements).

The epigraph refers generally to the evaluation of creative efforts of all singers and musicians mentioned in the dialogue, thus by extension it refers to Nero. Master of Petrarch is more interested in Arion: his woodcut shows the cittern-player on dolphin's back, other dolphins listening to his music, as well as his German contemporaries listening to other musicians. The transcendence of heavenly music over the music produced on earth, by inclusion – over Nero's music, is communicated by the presence of Gothic church in the picture and its singing congregation. From the upper corner of the woodcut God the Father himself listens to his Christian children singing [7, S.23].

To give the concise characteristic of the relations between other dialogues and their German interpretations, the majority of the latter may well have in mind Nero as a negative exemplar. In the dialogue on son-in-law, Nero figures as the worst kind of son-in-law, the one failing to save the life of his father-in-law [8. *De optimo genero*. I.75, p.346]; Pinicianus' epigraph catches on this theme [7, S.68], in the Master of Petrarch the son-in-law's sword is brought over father-in-law's head [7, S.68], which graphically exposes the nature of the dialogue's characters, Nero among them (Nero's father-in-law Emperor Claudius was poisoned, his mother Agrippina poisoned on his orders, he kicked to death his pregnant wife Poppaea, etc.) The dialogue "Die insigni discipulo" (A remarkable pupil. I.81) mentions Nero twice as "a powerful pupil", who "protected some of his mentors, while killing the others" [8, p.364]. Among those killed – Nero's tutor and later first advisor Seneca, the famous philosopher, whom Nero ordered to kill himself, allowing to choose the manner of his suicide. Pinicianus writes in his epigraph: "The intellect that bodes success often plunges one in evil" (*ingenium felix ad mala saepe ruit*) [7,S.72]. Master of Petrarch presents a classroom scene with older students fighting, and their masters taking out the moistened rods in order to pull them apart, and makes no further development of the theme [7, S.73]. Nero's further mentions in the dialogues lead to conclusion that the relations of the three texts – Petrarch, Pinicianus and Master of Petrarch –to each other are similar to those described above. The last text featuring Nero is "De amissa tyrannide"( On the loss of tyranny. II.81) [8, p.876-884]. It makes the appropriate finale to Nero's story. As usual, Petrarch draws several Greek and Roman examples, the earliest being the Greek tyrant Dionysius the Elder of Syracuse and the latest – the Roman 'trinity' of Caligula, Nero and Domitian (end of I cent. AD). In Petrarch's words, their cruelty "led to their killings"[8, p.880]. Petrarch is as stern to avarice and injustice. Poison and sword are what tyrants usually die from. Master of Petrarch follows close in the humanist's steps: he depicts a tyrant standing on top of a tower which is being attacked by rebellious citizens. The tower already tilts and is going to fall. [7, S.177]. There is little doubt that the artist sees in the place of the tyrant atop the tower all the tyrants named by Petrarch, including Nero. But the depiction of clothes, arms, power insignia, the tower architecture, – all refer the viewer to the time of the woodcut's production. Pinicianus is kinder to the tyrants who lost their power: he thinks their lives can be spared:

You who lost tyranny, rejoice – you are now free from intrigues,  
As hatred has left your soul [7, S.177].

However, Pinicianus does not doubt that any ruling tyrant hates his subjects. Perhaps his relative moderation (against Master of Petrarch) comes from Christian notion of murder as a sin, from his awareness that his country is in the throes of civil war – the Reformation.

To sum up. Our analysis of two narrative and one visual text opened many interesting new points. Obviously, Petrarch's dialogues mentioning Nero contain as much basic components of the Renaissance culture as the rest of the dialogues. His new humanistic concept of man in the world, of person within society makes him choose his exemplars based on the character's relations to his family and friends, his public and private behavior. In case of Nero, Petrarch is equally interested in his acts as princeps, their congruence with the Roman idea of the ruler as "the father of the country", serving the public good. It was noted that Book I of the treatise features Nero twice as often as Book II, and one may think that the main portion of Nero's life,

with its great aspirations and luxury, was in Petrarch's view an example of happy fortune (also in accordance with the theme of Book I). But Petrarch uses his Nero materials contrariwise. The author threads up the evidence that even the highest fortune bestowed upon a person lacking in justice, kindness, generosity, civic, familial and friendship values, will result in that person's fall and death. In one of the dialogues Petrarch even uses the medieval rumor – a very rare instance in Petrarch – that Antichrist will come in the image of Nero. In Petrarch's opinion, Nero's name is forever ignominious, his fame is notorious, similar in the nature to that of Herostratus: he burnt out, turned to ashes the ancestral honor, the respect for the princeps status, trampled down on family values, on the value of life.

Petrarch doesn't recount Suetonius, but his dialogues recreate the terrible life-story of Nero in its wholeness, starting from his ancestors and his mother, his tutor Seneca, through the silent enablers who executed Nero's orders – and to the final days of the tyrant and torturer, this horrific self-loving narcissus. If Petrarch had certain ethical and didactic goals, the construction of such narrative chain in the dialogues – one of the dozens in the treatise – makes a very effective device, which ensured the popularity of the book. In the German-speaking countries the treatise was a long-running "bestseller" (to use the word of one of the scholars) also due to the Pinicianus's epigraphs and even more so – due to Master of Petrarch woodcuts, which made Petrarch's contents more accessible. The three artists have, naturally, some differences in their positions, rising from their different historical periods and cultural attitudes. But their attitude to Roman tyrants, to Nero, was similar enough; the German "co-authors" shared the humanistic attitude of the pioneer of Italian Renaissance literature.

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