

Imperial Farce: Tacitus and the Plautine *Meretrix*

In the *Annals*, Tacitus provides a significantly different version of the love triangle between Otho, Nero, and Poppaea than he does in the *Histories*. Other primary sources agree with the *Histories* (Devillers 2008). I argue that this discrepancy can be explained by Tacitus' use of a comic archetype to flesh out Poppaea's character in the *Annals*. Comic archetypes are scarce in Tacitus, but their presence has been noted, for example in Claudius' repudiation of Messalina (Dickison 1977, 635). I argue that this phenomenon is not unique to Tacitus' treatment of Claudius, but that Tacitus falls back on comic stock characters again in his description of the love triangle between Otho, Nero, and Poppaea in the *Annals*. I further argue that Tacitus' use of comic tropes inflects his portrayal of Poppaea's active agency, an element that is absent in other sources.

In the *Annals*, Poppaea takes on the role of the comic *meretrix*, the object of the young man's (*adulescens*) affections. Otho and Nero, both unusually young for political power, perform the roles of her competing clients. Poppaea prefers Nero and manipulates him into prioritizing their relationship: "With an approach accepted, Poppaea first achieved influence by means of skillful blandishments, pretending that she was unequal to her desire and captured by Nero's good looks" (*accepto aditu Poppaea primum per blandimenta et artes valescere, imparem cupidini se et forma Neronis captam simulans, An. 13.46.2*, translations from Woodman 2004). Although Tacitus allows that Otho might have conspired with Poppaea to seduce Nero (13.46.1), Poppaea's *blandimenta* and *artes*, plus her skill in deception, bring the scheme to its conclusion. These are typical arts of the comic sex worker. *Meretrices* often manage two competing *adulescentes*, stringing each along for more money or better opportunities (as in *Asinaria*, *Miles*

Gloriosus, and *Truculentus*, among other Plautine plays). Poppaea's behavior here is highly reminiscent of their business practices.

Indeed, despite her imperial ambitions, Poppaea makes financial rather than political demands: "bound as she was to Otho by the kind of life which no one could equal: he was a man of magnificent spirit and refinement, she said, in him she saw things deserving of the highest fortune" (*devinctam Othoni per genus vitae quod nemo adaequaret: illum animo et cultu magnificentum; ibi se summa fortuna digna visere*, 13.46.2). Poppaea compares Nero's wealth and fortune to Otho's and concludes that Otho's resources are superior. This assertion is absurd on its face (Nero's magnificence was not small) and resembles the demands of the comic *meretrix* who plays her wealthy clients against each other and rejects impecunious admirers. (For comparison, see *Truculentus* 318, where a character describes *blandimenta* as typical of a *meretrix*.)

Comic dynamics are notably absent from other sources including the *Histories*, where Tacitus briefly describes the love triangle: "Therefore Nero had left with [Otho], privy as he was to his debaucheries, Poppaea Sabina, the imperial mistress, until he could get rid of his wife Octavia" (*eoque Poppaeam Sabinam, principale scortum, ut apud conscium libidinum deposuerat, donec Octaviam uxorem amoliretur*, 1.13.3, translation from Moore 1925). Here, Poppaea is passively transferred to Nero instead of choosing him.

In the *Annals*, more agency and guile are attributed to Poppaea than in any other ancient source. For example, Ginsburg has noted that Tacitus attributes to Poppaea an unusually crucial (and perhaps unbelievable role) in Agrippina's murder (2005, 47). In that episode, Tacitus also has Poppaea threaten to return to Otho (14.1.2), an unconvincing threat that nevertheless incites Nero's murder of Agrippina. Conspiracy to murder is not typical of the comic *meretrix*, yet

Tacitus' choice of Poppaea as instigator of murder demonstrates his portrayal of Poppaea as scheming instead of passive.

Tacitus' emphasis on Poppaea as a malign agent in history explains her relative prominence in the *Annals*. Despite her larger role, however, Poppaea rarely exercises her influence on Nero even after their marriage. (Her role as an instigator of Agrippina's death is an exception.) Tacitus appears to have emphasized her role in history by extrapolating upon the figure of the *meretrix*. I suggest that discrepancy between his portrayal of Poppaea in the *Annals* and elsewhere can be explained by the use of this comic material.

Works Cited

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