

Rome on Stage: Genre-Bending in Tacitus' *Annales*

In the *Annales*, Tacitus theatricalizes Rome and her leading and bit players. That the *Annales* extensively and richly feature intertextual allusion in general, and allusion to the Roman stage in particular, has been investigated recently by a number of scholars. The consensus, however, seems to be that Tacitus' heavy reliance on allusion serves either one or both of the following purposes: 1) That the dense interweaving of allusion to the whole of the Greek and Roman literary tradition allowed the writer to express himself at various depths of meaning at a time in which it had proved dangerous to write well openly; and 2) that rich use of intertext makes pleasurable the reading of material that would otherwise prove rather dry. While I do not disagree that Tacitus intended more and less vigorously toward each of these two ends respectively, a third element came into play in the crafting of the *Annales*.

Tacitus' history of the Julio-Claudian house is a literary work first and foremost and must be acknowledged as a peer of Roman epic and tragedy. Far from a simple account of occurrences by year or a string of lies, Tacitus' *Annales* is a prose epic-cum-tragedy — an inversion of the epics of Ennius and Vergil — which rather than celebrating the heroic deeds of Rome's great men, portrays leading Romans as tragic actors and stages Rome as a new Thebes, tragedy's *locus classicus*, all the while alluding to and communicating with, on several layers, specifically, the Senecan tragedies and their own 'sub-texts'. However, the staging of historical events in dramatic fashion and the epicization of the dark accomplishments of the emperors and their henchmen, more than simply serving a narratological function, seek to rejoin the writing of history to the writing of epic and to the Roman stage.

Closely analyzing sections of books I, IV and XIV, I intend to provide evidence of what modern critics might consider genre-bending in the *Annales*. That is, I wish to demonstrate not

only the relative fluidity of generic classifications, but also that in the *Annales*, Tacitus was consciously hailing the Roman stage as the mother of Roman epic and historiography, and that in so doing, he was able to create the multi-layered record of history and commentary on his world for which Tacitus is most famous, and was able to provide invaluable insight into the genealogy of Roman literature as a whole.

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