

Superstitio as Imperial Resistance: The Case of Pomponia Graecina

At the end of his account of 57 CE, Tacitus records that Pomponia Graecina was accused of practicing a foreign religion (*superstitio externa*, Tac. *Ann.* 13.32.2) and that Nero remitted her to her husband Aulus Plautius for punishment. After hearing her case in the presence of family, Plautius declared her innocent. In the same paragraph, Tacitus reveals that Pomponia's life was consumed by grief: she lived for forty years in mourning for her cousin Iulia, the daughter of Drusus and Livilla, who died due to the machinations of Messalina (Tac. *Ann.* 13.32.3). This paper connects the two halves of Tacitus' account and argues that Tacitus presents Pomponia's practice of non-Roman religion and unending mourning as two modes of resistance to imperial politics. Pomponia's treason goes unpunished due to her elite status, and her life of mourning ends in glory.

I first establish the parameters for Pomponia's religion within the context of Tacitus' *Annals*. *Superstitio* refers to outside religions or cults, including the rites of the Druids, Jews, and Christians. Tacitus refers to the "pernicious creed" of the Christians (*exitiabilis superstitio*, Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.3), and notes that the Jews are denigrated for relying on their superstitions (*gens superstitioni obnoxia*, Tac. *Hist.* 5.13.1). In Britain, the Druids are condemned and their sacred grove at Mona is destroyed as the site of their savage practice of human sacrifice (*saevis superstitionibus*, Tac. *Ann.* 14.30.3). Despite the denigration of these religions, foreign superstitions flourished in Rome under Claudius (Tac. *Ann.* 11.15.1). However, Nero persecuted the Christians, famously blaming them for the great fire of Rome, and his punishments were so harsh that even the Roman populace felt sympathy (Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.2-5).

Scholars have interpreted Pomponia's practice as Christianity (Barraco 2017; Lampe 2003, 196-197). In 57 CE, Pomponia would have been among the earliest Christians in Rome.

While Pomponia is accused, her husband is not: she has an independent religious practice from her husband, and a religious community of her own. Pomponia's sentence utilized an old-fashioned method of justice; as such, her case is comparable to Livy's account of the women in the Bacchanalian affair of 186 BCE (Livy 39.8-19). Pomponia's situation juxtaposes this traditional practice with the recent problem of Christianity, and the independence of an elite woman in her beliefs with her dependence upon her husband as judge. Pomponia's narrative alludes to the politics of Claudian and Neronian Rome, in which imperial family members could cause the deaths of relatives or display clemency just as easily. Pomponia is saved by her noble ancestry and the reputation of her husband (Aulus Plautius led the invasion of Britain in 43 CE and thereafter became the first governor of the province). By comparison, when Messalina and Gaius Silius are punished, along with many other eminent men, Aulus Plautius' nephew, Plautius Lateranus, is excused from death due to his uncle's outstanding service (Tac. *Ann.* 11.36.3). Lateranus is pardoned and returned to the senate by Nero in 55 CE (Tac. *Ann.* 13.11.2). When Nero hands Pomponia to her husband for judgment, he avoids condemning a member of the Plautii; by declaring her innocent, Plautius chooses to support his wife rather than play Nero's game.

The second half of Pomponia's narrative presents a different mode of resistance. In the same year that Pomponia traveled to Britain with her husband, her cousin Iulia was driven to suicide after Messalina falsely accused Iulia of incest and immorality (Tac. *Ann.* 13.43.2; Suet. *Claud.* 29.2; Dio 60.18.4). Pomponia publicly mourned the death of Iulia for forty years. Her sustained mourning violated custom, and I argue that her mourning clothes advertised a form of resistance to the imperial system that caused this death. Tacitus notes that Pomponia escaped punishment under Claudius, and that her mourning ended in personal glory (*ad gloriam*, Tac.

Ann. 13.32.3). She becomes worthy of memory due to her commemoration of another. Pomponia thus became an unexpected model through bearing witness to the injustices perpetrated by members of the imperial family.

Tacitus' juxtaposition of Pomponia's religious insubordination and perpetual grief makes readers wonder whether the murder of Iulia influenced Pomponia to reject imperial worship, and whether she turned to Christianity to find solace in her grief. The conclusions to this paper consider this question and suggest that Pomponia's trial and life of mourning combine to form a significant episode in Tacitus' narratives of female resistance to the principate. Pomponia's religious practice separates her from other elites, and her mourning confirms her rejection of imperial injustice.

Bibliography

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