

Textuality and Practice: The Wedding Messalina and Silius

This paper situates Tacitus' account of the wedding of C. Silius and Valeria Messalina (*Ann.* 11. 31.2-3) within a network of embodied practices. The goal is to decentralize textuality in favor of a more holistic reading of this perplexing passage. Rather than focus purely on intertextual references to other works of literature (viz. Euripides' *Bacchae*), this project emphasizes embodied cultural practices such as pantomime, song, dance, clothing, gesture and ritual that inform Tacitus' presentation of events.

Tacitus tells us that in 48 CE, Valeria Messalina married the consul designate C. Silius. There was a formal proposal followed by a wedding ceremony on an appointed day, in the presence of witnesses with auspicious words, sacrifice, and hugs and kisses before a night of spousal license. The only problem with this wedding was that Messalina was already married to Claudius, emperor of Rome. Later, Messalina and Silius host a wedding feast, a *simulacrum uendimiae*, celebrated throughout the imperial *domus*. The party is a bacchanal, complete with costumes, dancing, drinking, head tossing and thyrsus wielding. It is ordered chaos as Messalina conducts the *insanientes bacchae* (*Tac. Ann.* 11.31.2) and the interiority of the imperial *domus* is made external. Inside becomes out and private becomes public.

The theatricality of Tacitus' *Annals* in general, the wedding of Messalina in particular, has long been the subject of scholarly inquiry. Recently, Francesca Santoro L'Hoir (2006) has argued that the language of Tacitus throughout the *Annals* is reminiscent of Attic tragedy. Regarding the marriage of Silius and Messalina, Santoro L'Hoir and others have pointed back to Euripides' *Bacchae*. Though the play is the *locus*

classicus for representations of bacchic rites, the *Bacchae* is not necessarily the chief intertext to this episode. Rather, cultural scripts and other embodied practices inform Tacitus' account. Tacitus specifically mentions gestures and clothing that reference a variety of cultural practices. For example, Tacitus tells us that Silius wears *cothurni*, buskins associated with Bacchus and both Messalina and Silius shake or toss their heads, a nod to ritual practice common throughout accounts of bacchic celebration. I argue that these and others are not intertextual allusions but references to incorporating practices that happen to be inscribed in the literary tradition. As the historian Paul Connerton (1989) wrote, the memory of a society is more likely to be transmitted in clothing, gesture and ritual as it is in written texts. Therefore, a reading of any passage in the surviving texts, especially the one under investigation here, must integrate both incorporating and inscribing practices. Although intertextual allusion is not dismissed as unimportant in this study, it is decentered as references (in the sense discussed by Hinds 1998) to other cultural modalities are considered (Chartier 1997).

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