

Quasi Nero Triumphans: A Tacitean Reading of Ammianus Marcellinus' RG 16.8-10.

Ammianus Marcellinus, as has been well noted (Blockley, 1973) wrote his magisterial *Res Gestae* as a continuation of the narrative of Cornelius Tacitus. While several authors have looked for either similarities or differences between the two historians (Wilshire, 1973), few have been interested in the literary effect that Tacitus' works had on the *Res Gestae*. Timothy Barnes has recently examined Ammianus from the point of rhetorical historiography from which there is much to be gained (Barnes, 1998). In this paper, I argue that Ammianus sets up a thematic intertext between his own *Res Gestae* and Tacitus' *Annales* through the placement of key scenes of Neronian flavor, which culminate in Constantius' famous entry to Rome (*RG* 16.10). Further, this thematic intertext between Constantius' "triumph" and Nero's false triumph into Rome (*Ann* 14.13) forms a deep narrative inextricably linking Constantius with Tacitus' ultimate in depravity: Nero.

Book 16 of Ammianus' *Res Gestae* is one of heroes and villains, wherein Julian's virtues are praised in opposition to the exposure of Constantius' intrigues and vices. After introducing his hero Julian (*RG* 16.1-5), Ammianus changes the scene of action to Rome (*RG* 16.6) where trials are underway. Julian is denounced by one of his former subordinates to Constantius, and is only saved by the intervention of Eutherius, the emperor's chief chamberlain (*RG* 16.7). The scene devolves into a description of Constantius' depraved court, where rumor and slander serve as evidence (*RG* 16.8). The reader certainly recalls the imperial court at the close of the *Annales*, when senators lived in fear of Nero's advisors. Immediately following this pastiche of Constantius' depravity, Ammianus shows him powerless over his own commanders and enemies in the east, as Musonius and Cassianus intrigue for peace in with Persia (*RG* 16.9). This scene showing commanders making peace and war without their emperors, especially in the east,

cannot help but recall Corbullo's pacification of Parthian hostilities in Tacitus (*Ann* 15.1-17) followed by the erection of pointless arches in the city of Rome (*Ann* 15.18).

Following on these vignettes of Neronian corruption and military ineptitude, especially as contrasted with the heroic exploits of Julian in Gaul, already paint Constantius as an ineffectual and savage emperor. This portrait of Constantius is completed with the parade into Rome (*RG* 16.10). *Constantius quasi incluso Iani templo stratisque hostibus cunctis, Romam visere gestiebat, post Magnenti exitium absque nomine ex sanguine Romano triumphaturus.*

(Constantius, as if the Temple of Janus were closed and all enemies prostrated, was longing to see Rome, in triumph after the death of Magnentius without name and over Roman blood.)

Here, Ammianus attacks Constantius several times. Not only is this supposed triumph "nameless and over Roman blood," but the triumph is shown to be fictive with the "as if" setting apart the following description. What the reader encounters is the empty semblance of a triumph, without the proper religious and military prerequisites. Ammianus' description of Constantius' motives recalls both the duplicity of Tacitus' Tiberius (of *quasi*, e.g., *Ann* 4.19) and Nero's own entry to Rome in triumph over his mother (*Ann* 14.13.2): *obvias tribus, festo cultu senatum, coniugum ac liberorum agmina per sexum et aetatem disposita, extractos qua incederet, spectaculorum gradus, quo modo triumphi visuntur. hinc superbus ac publici servitii victor Capitolium adiit* (the tribes along the route, the senate in festive clothing, lines of wives and children placed according to sex and age, and drawn up where he would parade, tiers of viewing stands, in the way triumphs are watched. Hence as proud victor over public servility, [Nero] ascended the Capitol).

Ammianus' use of Constantius' empty triumph in itself recalls the Tacitean passage of an emperor triumphing, in effect, over Roman blood. The identification with Nero is all the more

convincing when this scene directly follows two Tacitean scenes of corruption and false peace. Constantius, through Ammianus' skillful deployment of Tacitean imagery, becomes not simply a beleaguered emperor, but a placidly contented treacherous one: in short, another Nero.

Bibliography

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