

The Shadow of Victory in Neronian Literature

Scholarship on the Neronian Age has long paid due attention either to Nero as a performer and the resulting ‘Neronian’ aesthetics of the period (e.g. Fantham 2013) or to the political engagement of the various authors—or conspicuous lack thereof. One related area that is often overlooked, however, is the military theme of empire. Yet, as Griffin (1985) accurately points out, Nero’s military image as the one who embodies Roman victory was central the role of any *princeps*, a role that led those after Tiberius to increasing insecurity due to their military inexperience. As it was the Roman ideology of victory that underpinned the entire edifice of empire *and* the principate (Fears 1981, Hölscher 2006), it is the goal of this paper to undertake a selective survey of instances where *victoria* emerges as a theme in Neronian poetry, an area where much work remains to be done. Such an investigation into this specific area of sociopolitical engagement will in turn help us better understand the various ways in which authors of this era reveal competing attitudes toward the Roman self-image as perpetual *victores* and the *princeps* as its guarantor. Perhaps not surprisingly, what emerges is a growing picture of victory insecurity.

Early in Nero’s reign, there was much hope for the new era, and accordingly we find in the First Eclogue of Calpurnius Siculus the bold and triumphant image of a young *princeps* who guides the nations and who has vanquished the raging Bellona with Neronian Pax (*victas | post tergum Bellona manus*, 1.46-7). More humorously, Seneca appropriates Roman victory imagery in his *Apocolocyntosis* to mock the dead Claudius on a few occasions, notably when the deified Augustus asks in horror whether he conquered land and sea only to make such travesties as a deified Claudius possible (10), followed by Claudius’ clueless approach to the Underworld as if in a mock-triumphal parade (13). Persius in his *Satires* more openly suggests that the

identification with *victoria* is problematic, for in his one instance of clear engagement with politics in Satire 6 he has his internal character threaten to lavish vast amounts of money on the “civic good” of a triumphal parade for Caligula’s glorious victories in Germany—a triumph that is such a sham, he notes, the emperor’s wife is busy whipping up manufactured “spoils” to display and buying blond wigs for those destined to play the “prisoners” (6.41-48). Seneca for his part presents in his tragedies numerous ‘victors’ whose victories are undercut in various ways, such as Pyrrhus at the end of the *Troiades* who weeps more than the rest after he plunges the victor’s knife into Polyxena over his father’s grave (*clarius victor gemit*, 1161).

It is in Neronian epic, however, that we see that the ideology of Roman *Victoria* truly fall apart. Lucan’s epic of civil war opens with the gut-wrenching image of Caesar’s victory in civil war as national suicide, where the act of victory *is* the act of defeat (*populumque potentem / in sua victrici conversum viscera dextra*, 1.2-3). In this he overturns the Vergilian hope of a *princeps* whose victory can chain *Furor* and bring peace to the Roman world and instead suggests that the Principate itself is based on the very foundation of Roman *Furor* and self-defeat (e.g. Behr 2007, Fratantuono 2012). The *Bellum Civile* of Petronius, too, put into the mouth of Eumolpus late in the surviving text of the *Satyricon*, focuses intently on the now-slippery language of victory and defeat in its own portrayal of the wars in which Rome won and lost to itself. All of this collectively stands as evidence of ongoing poetic reflection upon the very nature of Roman victory during the Neronian Age, reflecting a deep and growing anxiety over the very ability of the Principate to stand as the sure bulwark upon which Rome can remain firm.

Bibliography

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