

## The Predatory Poppaea: a Poppaeian Prototype in Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Historical Fiction

Hollywood films, such as 1932's *Sign of the Cross* and 1951's *Quo Vadis*, have perpetuated an image of a predatory, sexually aggressive, and vengeful Poppaea. Although married to Nero and thus empress, the cinematic Poppaea nevertheless pursues a sexual relationship with a Roman soldier and, when thwarted or rejected, seeks vengeance against him and his beloved, a Christian girl. Although this image predominates, it does not derive from the ancient sources themselves. I trace Poppaea's reputation and sexuality from antiquity onward and situate the development and height of the predatory Poppaea in historical fiction of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and within the contemporary context of the *femme fatale* figure and emergence and growing importance of the New Woman.

Poppaea's general reputation for promiscuity goes back to Tacitus, who labels her an imperial harlot in the *Histories* (the derogatory *scortum*, 1.13.3) and describes her promiscuous nature in the *Annals*, noting her salacious lifestyle, her lack of concern for her reputation, and how she did not distinguish between lovers and husbands and redirected her sexuality for best advantage (13.45.2-3). Yet no names, no specifics are given outside of her three husbands, Rufius Crispinus, the future emperor Otho, and the emperor Nero, with sources emphasizing her status as Nero's mistress while still married to Otho (e.g. Tacitus and Seneca call her Nero's *paelex* or Otho's wife). Feminine rivalry and jealousy appear toward Nero's wife Octavia, not his mistress Acte, as Poppaea attempts to remove her rival and position herself to marry Nero and become empress. There is no indication in the ancient sources that Poppaea, once married to Nero, conducted or attempted to have an affair or pursued vengeance against a rival for someone's affections.

The image of Poppaea's sexuality persists, in general terms, beyond antiquity, but without specifics or evidence. Boccaccio follows Tacitus' estimation in his 1362 *Concerning Famous Women*, while Monteverdi's 1643 opera *The Coronation of Poppaea* celebrates her elevation from mistress to Nero's wife and thus empress. Alexandre Dumas (1832's *Acte of Corinth*) and Ernst Renan (1873's *The Antichrist*) label her a courtesan. The 1624 anonymous tragedy *Nero* deviates, offering a Poppaea involved with one of Nero's conspirators, but seems to be unique at this point, until her romantic or sexual relationship with a conspirator occasionally reemerges in early 20<sup>th</sup> century plays and *pepla* films of the 1960s.

I examine the predatory and vengeful Poppaea who emerges in several novels of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Wilhelm Walloth's *Empress Octavia* (1885), Hugh Westbury's *Acte* (1890), and Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* (1896). Walloth's Poppaea attempts a playful seduction of the sculptor Metellus, whom Nero has set up to contrive a false adultery accusation against Octavia; as Poppaea is not married to Nero yet and is not serious about the affair, Walloth offers an intermediate Poppaea to those of the 1890s. Westbury presents one of the nastiest Poppaeas, one who not only is determined to punish the Christian Acte, both as a Christian and as a potential rival to reclaim Nero's affections and dethrone her, but also the Jewess Judith, the beloved of the Roman soldier Titus, after whom Poppaea lusts. To remove Judith, Poppaea ensures the girl is condemned to death in the arena in the aftermath of the great fire, yet Titus consistently rebuffs the empress. Sienkiewicz's Poppaea similarly desires a Roman soldier, Marcus, and, when rejected, goes after his beloved, the Christian Lygia; believing Lygia may also have played a role in her baby daughter's death, Poppaea encourages Nero to use the Christians as the scapegoat for the fire. These German, British, and Polish novels exaggerate and build on the general idea of a promiscuous Poppaea of the ancient sources by inventing her attempts at adultery, while Nero's

wife, for seemingly no other reason than lust. They also offer Poppaeas who, I argue, appear as reworkings of the deadly and dangerous yet attractive and seductive image of the *femme fatale* yet also can be read as negative reactions to the increasing visibility, roles, and opportunities, in terms of jobs, education, sexuality, and the family, of the New Woman of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Images of Poppaea's predatory sexuality find their inspiration, not in the ancient sources of Tacitus or Seneca, but in the historical novels of the late Victorian period and the changing roles and representations of women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.