

A Riot of Images: Statue Destruction and Historiography in Nero's Rome

The only recorded public protest against the Emperor Nero involved the removal or destruction of the statues of his second wife Sabina Poppaea in 62 CE. The two extant sources, dating from different points in the Flavian era, give different versions of the story. According to Tacitus (*Annales* 14.60-1), the demonstration began peacefully when clients of Nero's recently dismissed wife Claudia Octavia received a false report that she had been called back from exile. The protesters succeeded in temporarily displaying images of Octavia in the forum before soldiers dispersed the crowd and the statues of Nero's new wife Poppaea were replaced. In the *Octavia* the protest is far more violent: Poppaea's statues are overturned and destroyed by a populace hostile not only to Nero's new marriage, but to Nero himself. What accounts for these differences, and how are these two versions of the story related?

To answer these questions, I will discuss how Tacitus uses themes present in the *Octavia* in order to support his own historiographical program, thereby shifting the narrative focus and purported goal of the protest. Previous discussions about the connection between the two works use Tacitus' authority to prove that the protests really happened without considering how the different rhetorical goals of the individual texts affect the depiction of this particular event (Ginsberg 2017; Kragelund 2016; Boyle 2008; Ferri 2003; Ferri 1998). I will instead interpret Tacitus as a critical reader of the *Octavia* who not only mirrors its language for dramatic effect, but also engages in its claims to historical truth.

Tacitus' use of material from the play is appropriate in light of his own thematic concerns: in particular, the appearance of power as opposed to its reality (Haynes 2003; Bartsch 1994). The major structural similarity in the two accounts is the identification of the protest with the rivalry between Octavia and Poppaea. Octavia's speech in particular echoes language from

the play (Ferri 1998). Poppaea's speech too engages with the play and/or its historical tradition, but more obliquely, insisting that the demonstration is the not really the will of the people ("...clientelis et servitiis Octaviae, quae plebis sibi nomen indiderint"). Poppaea the character is both defined by and dissimulating in her personal appearance (13.54; 14.1), with passages conflating the real woman with her portraits which coincide with the imagery in the *Octavia* (683-6). For Tacitus, the demonstration is really about Octavia's images, with the removal of Poppaea's statues too easily reversed (*mutataque quae per seditionem verterant, et Poppaeae honos repositus est*).

In the *Octavia*, the act of destroying Poppaea's statue is the sole goal of the protest, and is equated to the Roman people breaking the power or even bodies of tyrants (*Ubi Romani vis est populi / fregit diros quae saepe duces*, 676-7). I will argue that the dismemberment of Poppaea's statues at the hands of the crowd (*membra per partes trahunt / diducta laqueis*, 797-8) is not only a symbolic capital punishment (Kragelund 1998) but also reminiscent of a tragic *sparagmos*. The conflation of Poppaea the person with her portrait statue is repeated in the language of her dream when the earth is "split open" (*diducta... tellus*) and she falls "headlong" (*praeceps*) into the underworld (725-8); the language is echoed in the messenger speech where a "rash" (*praecipites*) crowd topples her statues (*afflicta uulgi manibus et saeuo iacet / euersa ferro*, 796-7). The repetition of *diduca* is particularly notable and shows Poppaea's dream prophetic not of her own death, but of the death of her image (*contra* Ferri 2003).

The Tacitean focus on the protest's ultimate futility and the *Octavia*'s imagery of violence give different but not mutually exclusive accounts of the action. Ultimately, the relationship between the two versions of the protest reveals the issues at stake in the Flavian

reception of Nero's reign, as well as illustrating how Tacitus' history was written in dialogue with other texts.

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