

Plus quam amabile: The Boy Who Wept at Public Executions.

This paper uses a microhistory methodology (Aasgaard 2017) to contextualize an anecdote in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* that the *populus* responded favorably to an imperial child who reacted negatively to executions by *damnatio ad bestias*. Caracalla during his *pueritia* is remembered (*M. Ant.* I, 5) as routinely either weeping or turning his eyes away from convicts being thrown to wild animals – “an action which the people deemed more than worthy of their love.”

denique, si quando feris obiectos damnatos vidit,

flevit aut oculos avertit, quod populo plus quam amabile fuit

Two points require unpacking here: 1) why might this particular child behave this way during these kinds of public executions, and 2) why might spectators judge his behavior as *plus quam amabile* – “more than agreeable” or “deserving of their love.”

While scholars may speculate about the psychological impact of public executions, Roman children not only witnessed but sometimes participated in them (Toner 2017: 108). Their attendance was part of their socialization and reinforced a hierarchical social order according to gender, age, social class, and service to the state. Roman parents did not take their children to *munera* to teach them empathy for human suffering. Those on the arena floor – the gladiators, professional animal hunters, or condemned criminals – made morally efficacious examples precisely because they were deemed *contemptissimi*, the least valuable humans (Seneca, *Ep.* 70.22). Proper blood-sport games inured spectators to pain and blood, making them contemptuous of death and consequently more prone to taking risks that could lead to glory and victory (Cicero, *Tusc.* 2.41; Pliny, *Pan.* 33.1; SHA *Max.* 8).

Roman public executions were designed to be humiliating and prolong the suffering of the condemned as a means to assert the superior status of the persons wronged as well as the moral inferiority of the persons punished (Coleman 1990: 46-47). *Damnatio ad bestias* qualified as a shameful form of execution during the *ludi meridiani*. It was expensive to execute and wholly unpredictable due to the animals; its spectacle distanced spectators from the condemned by dehumanizing them as expendable bodies (Seneca, *Ep.* 7.3; Tertullian, *Nat.* 1.10.47; *Passio Perpet. Et Felic.* 21.2) and made visible the control of the games' sponsors over life and death.

As the emperor's son, Caracalla would be one of the most visible children at an execution. His youth is not sufficient excuse for his reputed behavior – at least by Roman standards. From the age of seven, Caracalla held the title of *Caesar* as heir apparent and had therefore a vested interest in upholding social order. The author of Caracalla's life hints that Caracalla was duplicitous from his boyhood (*M. Ant.* II, 1), concealing his true nature as “the least feeling man of all” (*M. Ant.* XI, 5: *hic omnium durissimus*). He is conscious of his visibility (*M. Ant.* I, 4) and courts good relations as well as a reputation for imperial virtues like *benevolentia*, *largitas*, and *clementia* with constituencies that can ensure his succession – his parents, their friends, the people, the senate, and the imperial household (*M. Ant.* I, 3-4, 8). Caracalla's averted gaze and tears make him seem “kind” (*benignus*) by hiding his cruel nature, a deceit attributed to him as an adult (*M. Ant.* V, 2).

This Caracalla despises his brother Geta due to Geta's great *humilitas* (*M. Ant.* II, 3), normally a negative quality like “littleness of mind” but here seemingly a positive attribute like “modesty” or “ability to identify with the low”. Caracalla's behavior at executions may be a way to outcompete his brother for the *favor populi*. The visibility and brutality of public executions, though designed to break the solidarity between spectators and the condemned, could in fact

reinforce it by threatening all witnesses with the same “legal violence exercised without moderation or restraint” (Foucault 1995: 63). Caracalla appears to object to these executions as *crudele spectaculum et inhumanum* (Cicero, *Tusc.* 2.41), which though fitting punishments for the crimes committed, can teach those who see them cruelty (Seneca, *Ep.* 7.3-6). Thus the *populus* may interpret the actions of this boy *Caesar* as *plus quam amabile* because they presage a less cruel *Augustus*.

Bibliography

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