

HUI216

Italian Civilization

Andrea Fedi

13.1 Tacitus: the sin of incest, the art of innuendo

- Consider how Tacitus treats the alleged incest of Agrippina and Nero, introducing other sources and eyewitnesses, never fully supporting or denying the allegations of incest, all the while giving the impression that he wants to keep an objective stand
 - Cluvius relates that Agrippina in her eagerness to retain her influence went so far that more than once at midday, when Nero, even at that hour, was flushed with wine and feasting, she presented herself attractively attired to her half intoxicated son and offered him her person...

13.1 Tacitus: incest, superstition, verisimile

- Acte, the freed-girl, ...told him [=Seneca] that the incest was notorious, as his mother boasted of it, and that the soldiers would never endure the rule of an impious sovereign
- Cluvius's account... is also that of all other authors, and popular belief inclines to it, whether it was that Agrippina really conceived such a monstrous wickedness in her heart, or perhaps because the thought of a strange passion seemed comparatively credible...

13.1 Agrippina's theatrical death: a tragic fate

- Agrippina's death is associated with the idea of fate, typical of classical tragedies
- First you find the description of the shipwreck, at night (darkness and evil acts go hand in hand, in tragedies and in literature)
- Then, after Agrippina's messenger is accused of being a murderer and is killed, she dies in the most theatrical way
 - ...as the centurion bared his sword for the fatal deed, presenting her person, she exclaimed, 'Smite my womb!'

13.1 Agrippina's death: prelude (greed, ambition) and consequences (guilt, fear)

- Her death apparently had even been anticipated, as it was written in the stars:
 - ...when she consulted the astrologers about Nero, they replied that he would be emperor and kill his mother. 'Let him kill her,' she said, 'provided he is emperor.'
- After the crime, only guilt and fear follow
 - Where are the political considerations?
 - In reality Agrippina and Nero had probably become estranged, as it happens often to royals, and they were fighting for power and supremacy

13.1 After the crime: guilt, panic, hypocrisy, escape

- [Nero], when the crime was... accomplished, realized its portentous guilt
- The rest of the night, now silent and stupefied, now and still oftener starting up in terror, bereft of reason, he awaited dawn as if it would bring with it his doom.
- He himself, with an opposite phase of hypocrisy, seemed sad, and almost angry at his own deliverance, and shed tears over his mother's death.
- ...he retired to Naples and sent a letter to the Senate

13.1 The responsibility and incompetence of the Senate: the opposition has high moral values, lacks a plan

- He... told the story of the shipwreck; but who could be so stupid as to believe that it was accidental, or that a shipwrecked woman had sent one man with a weapon to break through an Emperor's guards and fleets?
- Thrasea Paetus... then walked out of the Senate, thereby imperiling himself, without communicating to the other senators any impulse towards freedom
 - Paetus will later commit suicide

13.1 The consequences of sinful behavior

- Nero... had not omitted a single abomination which could heighten his depravity, till a few days afterwards he stooped to marry himself to one of that filthy herd...
- A disaster followed, whether accidental or treacherously contrived by the emperor, is uncertain, as authors have given both accounts, worse, however, and more dreadful than any which have ever happened to this city by the violence of fire.
- Nero's Golden House (Domus aurea)
 - Optional readings
 - [Pictures of the archeological site](#) of Nero's palace
 - read [more about Nero](#)

13.2 Suetonius (circa 110 CE), *Life of Nero* (transl. by J.C. Rolfe): the Golden House

- Its vestibule was large enough to contain a colossal statue of the Emperor 120 feet high; and it was so extensive that it had a triple colonnade a mile long
- There was a pond too, like a sea, surrounded with buildings to represent cities, besides tracts of country, . . . fields, vineyards, pastures and woods, with great numbers of wild and domestic animals
- There were dining-rooms with fretted ceilings of ivory, whose panels could turn and shower down flowers and were fitted with pipes for sprinkling the guests with perfumes
- The main banquet hall was circular and constantly revolved day and night, like the heavens

13.3 The first Roman Emperors

- Augustus 27 BCE-14 CE
- Tiberius 14-37
- Caligula 37-41
- Claudius 41-54
- Nero 54-68
- Galba 68-69, Otho 69, Vitellius 69
- Vespasian 69-79
- Titus 79-81
- Domitian 81-96
- Nerva 96-98
- Trajan 98-117
- Hadrian 117-138

13.4 More optional readings on Nero and Tacitus

- To sort out the imperial family ties, in the two episodes by Tacitus, here is a detailed family tree
 - <http://www.ancientroute.com/Trees/claudian.htm>
- Nero, his family, the court
 - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/nero.shtml
 - <http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/empire3c.html>

13.5 Claudio Monteverdi's opera on Nero

- With the following excerpts from Monteverdi's opera I would like to help you understand the opera's themes, and the image of the Roman Empire that it conveys
- This opera was staged in Venice in 1642 or '43, and Venice, as a Republic, also "prided itself on its direct lineage from the Roman republic, retaining the values that had been so distorted as classical Rome moved from republican strength to imperial decadence, a decadence still apparent, it was felt, in the Rome of the early 17th-century" (Tim Carter, "Towards the creation of genre: Monteverdi's *Poppea*," p. 18)
- There is a thesis clearly at work throughout this opera: when the state is in the hands of a tyrant, immorality thrives, especially near the source of power, at the court, while the fate of the whole state must also decline

13.5 Monteverdi's *Poppea*: Nero the immoral tyrant

- It is not surprising that, even before Nero appears on the scene, at the beginning of the first act he is introduced (during the conversation that takes place between two Roman soldiers) as a most hateful character, who has no regard whatsoever for the sanctity of marriage, neglects the care of the empire at a critical historical juncture, and favors those like him who lack moral values and self-control
- Second soldier:
 - Our Empress consumes herself with weeping, and Nero neglects her for Poppaea. Armenia's in revolt, yet he ignores it. Pannonia's up in arms and he makes light of it. As far as I can see, the empire's going from back to worse.

13.5 Monteverdi's *Poppea*: the tyrant affects the moral stability of single individuals

- First soldier:
 - One might add that our Prince robs everyone to line the pockets of a few. The innocents suffer while criminals are doing very nicely.
- The introduction of the historical details of the decadence of Imperial Rome gives the author of the libretto an opportunity, later on in the first act, to discuss more generic moral and political issues, when Arnalta, Poppaea's old nurse and confidant, tries to warn her about the dangers of dealing with evil princes:
 - To have dealings with princes is perilous. Love and hate count for nothing with them: their emotions are governed by pure self-interest. Nero's love for you is a but a fancy; if he abandons you, you can't complain: it would only make matters worse.

13.5 Monteverdi's *Poppea*: tyranny may corrupt the souls of the subjects

- POPPAEA

- No, no, I fear no setback at all.

- ARNALTA

- A great man honors you with his mere presence, and, having filled your house with wind, pays in nothing but reflected glory.

Your good name's gone if you admit:

Nero beds me.

The vice of self-aggrandizement gets you nowhere:
I prefer the sins that yield returns.

You can never deal with him on equal terms,
and if your goal is marriage
you're asking for disaster.

- POPPAEA

- No, no, I fear no setback at all.

13.5 Monteverdi's *Poppea*: power and personal whims

- Following suggestions coming from the historical sources, the opera presents the suicide of Seneca as the simple result of Nero's almost childish desire to free himself of his tutors, his only reasonable counselors
- Power has all to do with personal whims and the satisfaction of one's ego, rather than with politics or the care of the well-being of the community
 - NERO: Hey! One of you
make haste to Seneca; tell him
he must kill himself this evening.
I insist that my power to act depends on me,
not on the whims and sophistry of others!
I could almost be tempted
to disown my spirit
if I believed it base enough
to be ever subject to another's promptings.
Poppaea, be of good heart:
today will bring you prove of Cupid's power.

13.5 Monteverdi's *Poppea*: Nero, the monster

- Even those who act as accomplices to Nero, and execute his orders, feel a very natural and human repulsion for the behavior and the devilish decisions of such a wicked man
- A freedman, sent by the Emperor to inform Seneca that he should take his own life, confesses that he cannot bear to be the messenger of such cruel and irrational orders
 - (The tyrant's commands are quite irrational and always involve violence or death. I must convey them, and although I am only the innocent mouthpiece, I feel tainted by the evil I am required to communicate.)
Seneca, I am sorry to have found you, even though I sought you.

13.5 Monteverdi's *Poppea*: the immoral conclusion

- The conclusion of the opera appears to be a bit unusual, in that Nero and his lover, Poppaea, sing together on stage celebrating their success against all enemies and the realization of their dream of love
- The extraordinary thing is that two characters who have committed so many sins are allowed to close the story on the sensuous notes of their (temporary) triumph: so, does crime really pay?
- It is obvious, rather, given the standards and the restrictions of the genre, that this conclusion implied the widespread knowledge that the audience must have had of the actual historical conclusion of the events in the story, with Poppaea murdered and Nero killing himself right before being captured by his opponents

13.5 Monteverdi's *Poppea*: the final duet

- POPPAEA, NERO

- I gaze at you,
possess you,
press you to me,
clasp you;
no more pain,
no deathly grief,
O my life, my treasure.
I'm yours,
yours am I,
my dearest, say you love me too.
You are the idol
of my heart,
oh yes, my love,
my heart, my life, oh yes.

13.6 Petrolini's Nero: Mussolini?

- In 1930, Italian actor/comedian Ettore Petrolini (1886-1936) acted as Nero in a surreal theatrical parody, that famous director Alessandro Blasetti shot directly on the stage to produce a movie
- Some suggested that Mussolini might have been the target of this satirical representation of the Roman tyrant, especially in the scene in which Nero speaks to the people of Rome
- For more info, if you can read Italian, and images, see
 - <http://www.theatrelibrary.org/petrolini/nerone.html>