ONE FOR FALCO: THE TRIBUNE AND HIS LADY

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ABSTRACT

This Tacitean tabloid tale of lust, murder, and mystery is here given the close circumstantial, linguistic, and stylistic scrutiny that it has never previously received in any article, book, or commentary. The historian's capacity for telling a good story well is pointed up, in terms of narrative pace and sweep, also disclosing aspects of his Latinity neglected by Furneaux and Koestcrmann—some even eluded Syme, despite whom this episode was written up for its own sake, not merely as curtain-raiser for Poppaea. Finally—again remarkably unremarked by any predecessor—just who did what remains unclear: hence the titular call for Falco.

In A.D. 58, after a stormy affair, the tribune Octavius Sagitta stabbed his mistress, the lady Portia, to death, for which crime of passion he was duly tried, convicted, and sentenced. According to Syme, 'sex is not among the main preoccupations of Tacitus', the episode being included only as a curtain-raiser to the introduction of a more potent femme fatale, Poppaea Sabina. Sir Ronald was here doubly unfair to his historiographical hero. Whilst never (at least in the extant portions: who knows what may have adorned the lost books on Caligula?) detailing imperial lubricities in the manner of Suetonius, Tacitus did quite like to give his readers (and himself) an erotic shiver: witness (e.g.) the praetor who fatally defenestrated his wife (Ann. 4.22); Vessilia, a matron of good family who registered as a public prostitute (Ann. 2.65); the wife of the legate Calvisius Sabinus who broke into a military camp and committed adultery in the officers' mess (Hist. 1.48); the loss of his base and naval flotilla to marauding Germans by Petilius Cerialis, not in his flagship where he should have been but away in the bed of an Ubian woman, Claudia Sacrat a (Hist. 5.22); the nocturnal orgy arranged by Tigellinus for Nero with its naked women and hints of homosexual lusts (Ann. 15.37); prostitutes plying their trade alongside bloody corpses during the conflict of Flavian and Vitellian partisans (Hist. 3.83); Tiberius' spiritreins and sellarians, glanced at with mock concern

1. Tacitus (Oxford 1919) 544; cf. 236 n. 8 and 310 for equally brief and parochial allusions.
for their etymology as well as their activities (Ann. 6.1); best of all in a catalogue of futile prodigies, the hapless ‘mother of children made lame’ examined” (Ann. 14.12).  

T tacitus devotes one self-contained section (13.44) of his Annals to this tabloid tale, reprising it briefly at Hist. 4.44, while according to a late anonymous biographer (it is not in the Suetonius Life), Livon was inspired by the event to produce a pair of prose eulogies ‘in Octavium Sagittam et procoo’.  

The regrettable loss of these effusions from the post-declaimer prompts an obvious question: what (if anything) did they contribute to the content and style of Tacitus’ version?  

Most people are drawn to sex and violence, even if guiltily, and those who adjudge the Romans too dour and stiff upper-lip might even rejoice at this evidence of high emotion. It was a story worth telling for its own sake, not just as curiosity to Poppaea, and that is why Tacitus tells it, combining— as we shall see—a good mystery, vividness of style, and peopling details. Yet it has apparently attracted not a single study in modern times, to judge from bibliographies down to the most (at the time of writing) recent (64, 1998) issue of L’Année Philologique. There is nothing on offer in Syme, nor in the now standard edition (Heidelberg 1967) of E. Koestermann, whose few remarks are too much in acknowledged thrall to Syme and silent dependent to the point of trahslician error on the old (Oxford 1967) commentary of H. Furseus; the latter likewise mentioning no specific investigations. Hence this episcule.

Per idem tempus Octavius Sagitta plebei tribunus, Pontiae mulieris nuptw amore vaecors, ingentibus donis adulterium et mox ut omitteret maritcum.

The black comedy of this last is not remarked by P. F. Pass, Wit and the Writings of History (Oxford 1988) who likewise omits the present passage. For a full catalogue, see Baldwin, ‘Women in Tacitus’. Prudentia 4 (1972) 88–104.


3. My specific findings on Koestermann confirm these unexampled animadversions of F. D. B. Goodyear in the inaugural volume (Cambridge 1972) of his commentary on the first book of the Annals, 18: i, 1: ‘His dependence on Furneaux for observations on Tacitus usage is barely less than scandalous, but it has passed largely unremarked by reviewers. He has at least paid the plagiarist’s penalty, for some of the information he copies is erroneous or at least incomplete’. As Goodyear goes on to remark, Syme had long ago complained in his review of Furseus’ edition in JRS 38 (1948) 123 about the ‘shod and pettiness of the commentators’.

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Byrhtferd famously remarked, "my style is the same as that of the poet," and one readily agrees with Sycy (363) that Tacitus "writes with that imagination which is the soul of history as it is the soul of poetry." So, following the precept of Dialogue 10, "eloquentia anteponenda ceteris studiis."  

Octavius Sagitta is historically introduced as "plebi trihunus," this simple and archaic formula (also employed at Ann. 1.15, 1.77, 6.12, 6.47, 13.28) contrasting sharply with his mad passion for a lady, and a married one at that. The expression "amore vacabat" is paralleled in a fragment (637) of the tragedian Accius, conceivably here a direct influence. It comes from the prologue to Teucrus, a melodrama amply furnished with sex and violence, wherein the love-crazed king "facinus pessimum ex dementia conficiit" as did Octavius. The simplest main verb "emercurat" is one of nine finite historic presents which along with six historic infinitives and five present participles contribute much to the narrative sweep. "Emercurat" does not occur before Tacitus: did he coin it? It is employed four times, only in the later books of the Annales (12.14, 12.45, 13.44, 16.1), always in the present tense or perfect participle. This verb is absent from Syme's register (734-35) of new words in the third hexad. Apart from a stray occurrence in the Christan Hesychopsis, the only subsequent author with...
whom it found favour (so the TLL) was Ammianus Marcellinus, who has it
thrice (21.6.8, 22.9.12, 26.2.4), a detail pertinent to the continuing debate
over the extent of stylistic debts owed by the later to the earlier historian.9 Regarding
‘nuptias pactus’, I cannot imagine why Koestermann should say that this
active sense of the verb is only elsewhere in Tacitus at Ann. 12.45; there are
equally striking examples at Ann. 16.22, also Hist. 3.49 and 4.60. ‘Tacitus’
specific ‘nuptias pactus’ is paralleled in Quintilian (?), Declam. 343. The
black humour of this opening sentence is palpable: Octavius purchases
Poncia’s embraces at huge cost, then must expend more to entice her to
leave her husband, freely promising her his hand but having to negotiate
for her. The lady duly becomes available to remarriage. For ‘vacua’ in this
sense, Furneaux, therefore also Koestermann, adduces Ovid, Met. 14.831,
though the poet there applies the epithet to Romulus’ widow: Horace,
Carm. 1.5.10; Ovid, Her. 19.149, Quintilian (?), Declam. 376, are better
parallels. ‘Necere’ in use with ‘moras’ by the historian: Ann.
12.14: Hist. 3.52 and 4.68. ‘Voluntatem causari’ is owed to Sallust (Hist.
5.15: Maurenbrecher = 5.13 McGushin), ‘voluntatem causavi’, the verb
only here in the earlier historian and rare in Tacitus: Ann.
1.47. Hist. 3.59. It is suitable that Octavius should protest his ‘famam perditanam’,
the adjective being ubiquitously applied in Roman literature to men made
desperate by both love and bankruptcy. ‘Ad solacium poscit’ could owe
something to the Ovidian ‘solacia postc’ (Met. 7.485), albeit the words
(Ann. 4.55) of the widowed Agrippina to Tiberius may also be invoked;
‘neque alium probis (sc. feminis) quam ex matrimonio solacium esse’. As
neither Furneaux nor Koestermann observe, the ensuing description of the
fateful nocturnal assignation and murder shares a number of details with
the more famous account of Agrippina’s killing at Ann. 14.8: ‘serenum tempus
... concivit auxilium custodiam cubiculi ... ferro transverse ... adorare
ancillam vulnere aspexit, cubiculoque praeputum ... ex vulnerum reflecta’
have their echoes and parallels in ‘inruptunt ... ferro transverse ... adcur-
rantem ancillam vulnere absterret cubiculoque prorupti ... ex vulnere
refecta’ have their echoes and parallels in ‘inruptunt ... ferro destringenti’. There is no truth to Koestermann’s
assertion that in Tacitus ‘occultus’ preponderates over ‘occultatus’. The
historian is fond of the know-it-all impersonal ‘ut adsolet’: thrice elsewhere
in the Annals, once in the Histories—he uses no other form of this verb.
The asyndetic vocabulary, ‘inopia pessima, expropria satisfactio’, is ideally
(1973) 63-78.
10. Furneaux did not remark upon this, therefore neither does Koestermann.
related to the erotic melodrama. *Burjia* and *preces* are standard nouns in the Roman language of love and quarrels. Tacitus only uses *exprobratio* twice, here and just before at Ann. 13.42. Though going back as far as Terence (Andria 44), the word is not that common (Cicero never uses it); most of the dictionary examples are from authors of the first century AD. *Satisfactio* may not look like a very interesting word, but here it is, on two counts. First, Tacitus elsewhere only has it at Germ. 21.4; it is not part of the normal vocabulary of his major works, so presumably is chosen here for a purpose. That purpose might be clarified by Pliny, **NM** 10.104, on the amorous habits of doves, where it is used of the cock's *trans palens querellae guttur saevique rostro ictus, meus in satisfactio precibus credo pedum tebus adstitere*. Both languages (*solacia* also occurs in the Plinian passage) and theme are consonant with Octavius. Doves may be comically portraying him and Pontia as *love-doves* (indeed Tacitus *columba* was a term of Roman endearment (e.g. *Plaut.* *As.* 698; *Cae.* 138) — which would accommodate both broad comedy and irony since Pliny commends these birds for avoiding adultery and never leaving the nest ‘nisi caelebs aut vidua’. Editors (apart from Walther) are right to accept *libidinam* and *sexta* of *satisfactione* in the *Medi* -ium ms. to derive *libidinam*. Tacitus’ normal construction with *sepem* to the three parallel adduced by Furneaux and appropriated by Koestermann from the *Annals*, add the striking ‘senectuti seposui’ from the opening chapter of the *History*. There is more at stake with *ex qua quasi inlensus*, the result of *ex qua quasi inlensus* — why, I seem to be alone in wondering, did the scribe go so wildly astray here? The editorial divide is between those who want to add ‘quasi’ and those who are content with ‘ex qua’. Furneaux, faithfully Germanised without acknowledgement by Koestermann, claims that it ‘quasi is read. It would imply that the murder was really deliberate (a weapon having been brought for the purpose), but committed as if under a passion of passion’. I don’t see the logic of this, and on the whole would leave ‘quasi’ out; it is much more effective to have Octavius unreservedly ‘incensus’ (Tacitus several times uses the verb to write the killing of Pontia, *transversico*), as a result of what Aldous Huxley (in *Point Counter Point*) calls ‘batrachian grappling in the dark’. The verb used to describe the killing of Pontia, *transversico*, is only here in the *Annals* (twice in the *History* 1.42 and 3.17), hence its impact is stylistic as well as physical. The word is common enough in other authors, hence Syme should have included it in his discussion of terms avoided or sparingly used by Tacitus. Finally, ‘mansitasse’, only here and at Ann. 14.42, another narrative of sex and murder. Syme (735) rightly notes it as a new word in the third hexad. Did Tacitus invent it? The TLL adduces no earlier

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11 For asyndeton in Tacitus, Goodwyn (note 5) 292-93.
author. If so, it did not much catch on, being illustrated by TLL only from Tertullian, Solinus, and a handful of late minor authors. Absent from TLL is the only other distinctive occurrence, in a letter of Fronto (174:22 Van den Hout = 185 Naber = 2:56 Mairus). Furneaux gives a reference to Plooy, *NF* 10:5, reproduced by Koester-Spaw, but I cannot see it there, nor did TLL.

It is notable that Tacitus does not here state the precise punishment meted out to Octavius. A Roman reader would doubtless infer it from the provisions of the "lex de sicariis". The historian reports no other such case. Presumably, Octavius had to resign his tribunate or be deposed from it to avoid infringement of his sacrosanct status. More is learned when Tacitus returns to the case at *Hist* 4:44. In A.D. 70, Octavius attempted to take advantage of a general amnesty for victims of Nero—proposed by Domitian and opposed by Mucianus in debates in the senate. Octavius had been sent to minor exile, from which he had now escaped. Tacitus emphasizes that he had been originally condemned "gravi senatus consulto", as perhaps befitted a fellow so strikingly labeled as "impotens auctoris". At the insistence of Mucianus, his bid for clemency was rejected and his punishment confirmed. A like fate befell the ex-praetor Antiniae Sosiana, the first victim of treason trials under Nero (Ann. 14:48)—he had composed scurrilous verses against the emperor and recited them at a dinner party. Tacitus concludes by reporting the murrings of senators who resented this intervention by Mucianus: "quippe Sosiana et Sagittae vulgus si reverenter!"

In neither account does Tacitus add to our knowledge of Octavius. Perhaps he had no further information: all we have is here, along with an inscription (CIL 9.3311) from the Paedugian district commemorating a bemononym: "Q. Octavio, L. f. Sagittae, quinqu. 11, pagus Boedinus". Perhaps Tacitus did not care, or thought his audience would not. Or was he sensitive to possible connections with the late, great Nerva? Syme's prosopographical wizardery established (627) that the Mucian Octavi were that emperor's kinmen. It is the same with his lady. Plain Pontia in the Annals, she is expanded to Pontia Postumina in the *Histories*. Observing that the name Pontius is "common and indistinctive", Syme (627 n. 4) finds only one consular example: P. Petronius Pontius Niger, possibly the father of T. Petronius Niger, the latter equated by many with the author of the *Satyricon*. We need not go down that particular trail here, but can subject (as Syme did not) the exotic fact of another unconvincing Pontia, this one the daughter of Publius Petronius, said by a scholiast on Juvenal 6:636 to have been condemned under Nero for poisoning her sons in widowhood and to have died by opening her veins (shades of the Arbiter himself?) and dancing herself to death, satiatrix being her favorite hobby.

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Narrative is the essence of history. To tell a story properly calls for speed and variety. Those virtues are inherent in the style of Tacitus. He never allows the action to flag or stagnate. Narrative records and explains what happened; imagination compels it to be seen and shared. An artist has free choice with description—he can choose, add, and invent. The tragic tale of Octavian Sagitta and Pontia Postumia conforms to this Symean scheme. Especially, perhaps, its final sentence. For, as with (say) the account of Neré's mother going down in the collapsible boat, certain details do not easily stand up to the scrutiny this narrative has previously not had. How many maids of Pontia were there? In Michael Grant's Penguin version, we first have one who was privy to the plot, then one who runs in after the stabbing, for Grant translates the second one 'a maid', implying she was not the same one. The ambiguity (of course) the result of Latin having no definite or indefinite articles. But, one maid or two, if she found the body after running in, how did she know whose hand had wielded the knife? And what about the ex-clause? Surely he was not present as a voycer in the boudoir why his master was making love to Pontia. So, where might he have accomplished the deed? Did Octavius storm out after a renewed quarrel, thus provoking his companion to enter the bedroom and stab the lady? But then, presumably, he would also have to be the one who wounded the maid—perhaps is all happened in the dark and she only assumed Octavius to be her attacker. At all events, some Romans believed his story, and his judge must have had the seeds of doubt planted in their minds.
offer reprieve from warfare, legislation, and the history of ideas; and they enrich the
central theme of social history if and when enough evidence is available'. Tacitus
also provides the envoy for Ursula in the finale of his Agricola: 'quæquid amavimus,
quæquid mirati sumus, manet mansurumque est in animis hominum, in aeternitate
temporum, fuma rerum'.

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