

On Tacitus: Evidence for Intimate Partner Violence in Early Imperial Rome

Tacitus's *Annals* is a promising and thus-far unplumbed source for evidence of intimate partner violence in upper-class Romans relationships between free persons. Therefore, this paper will examine the Tacitean evidence in the context of other evidence of intimate partner violence from the time, in order to demonstrate that the anecdotes he relates should be read as significant evidence of such violence in Roman free marriages. Tacitus presents two marked anecdotes: first, in 4.33, the apparent murder of Apronia by her husband through battery of some kind (*in praeceps iecit*) under mysterious circumstances; and second, in 13.44, the calculated murder of Pontia by her lover, wherein he brought a concealed weapon (*ferrum veste occultum infert*) to a final tryst after she refused to marry him (*postquam spernebatur*) and subsequently killed her with it. Also worth mention is the casual violence of Nero toward Poppaea, driven by a "change burst of temper" (*fortuita... iracundia*) which resulted in her death in Ann. 16.6. Taken separately, any of these anecdotes might be understood as worthy of remark by Tacitus because they stand out as a particularly horrible sort of interpersonal violence. When these chapters are read together, however, and in light of other evidence of intimate partner violence in Roman society that both pre- and post-dates these events, they can be taken understood as examples of the potential for violence in Roman marriage, even amongst the more-sheltered upper classes.

None of what little scholarship does exist on intimate partner violence in Roman free (*sine manu*) marriage and other intimate relationships mentions Tacitus. What there is focuses on either legalities around marriage at the time (eg. Grubb 2002), presumed notions of whether or not Romans considered it acceptable to beat one's wife (eg. Fagan 2011, Frier and McGinn 2003), or, most rarely, on one of a few other specific historical narratives (eg. Pomeroy 2007, on

the murder of Regilla). And, in fact, some of these sources significantly dismiss that there was intimate partner violence taking place in this sort of relationship; however, as Clark points out in her study of Augustine's Confessions, "it is reasonable to assume a priori that domestic violence was not the invention of the Christian community" (Clark 1998, 120). With this in mind, and taking the tack of Richlin (2014) who suggests that in order to discover 'what happened' to Roman women, we must ask the same questions of multiple texts, I aim to ask of Tacitus what we might learn about violent dynamics within Roman marriage. His text has thus far gone unappraised in this way, but his presentations of the above mentioned incidents—as well as more minor casual violence in families—make it clear that his histories may well have something to teach us.

Works Cited

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