

„Toll trieben es die alten Römer“ – German for „on the luxury, voluptuousness and decadence of the ancient Romans“, this was the headline of a newspaper advertisement which I read not long ago announcing the first performance of Georg Friedrich Händel's opera *Agrippina* in the National Theatre of Saarbrücken, my hometown. There can be no doubt these words agree with the picture which prevails in a wider public, and not only in the public of today, of ancient Rome and especially of the epoch, of which the heroine of the opera was a contemporary. This period was, as far as many are convinced, the time which saw the reign of emperors as „decadent“ as a Nero. The text which followed the theatre advertisement exactly awakens the association with the machinations of, say, the Denver clan. And this view is still more sharpened when the announcement text continues to speak of a „youthful perspective on the dynamics of power“. „The dynamics of power“ – well, there we are exactly at the topic the best of our historiographers whet their pen on. No wonder, for it is they who provide our informations about the lives and deeds of the persons, whom we see acting on the scene of Händel's *Agrippina* and of a great many of renaissance and baroque operas alike<sup>1</sup>. In the libretti of these dramas we shall find the same tension between stories, indulging in sensational narrative, and history, the instrument of critical analysis of these *facta* and *facta*; a tension, that is well embodied by the Saarbrücken newspaper advertisement I have quoted.

The writer of Händel's libretto, Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani<sup>2</sup> (his family owned the theatre San Giovanni Grisostomo, today the Teatro Malibran, near the Rialto bridge in Venice, the place of the first performance of *Agrippina*), places himself in the tradition of his native Venetian Opera of the 17th century, making use of the abundance of intrigues and comical elements, which we find also in the treatment of the Nero-Poppaea-story in Giovanni Francesco Busenello's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (first performed in Venice 1642, with the marvellous music by Claudio Monteverdi). In shaping their image of the early Roman empire, Busenello, Grimani and their contemporaries just as ourselves mainly take their informations from some of the most important ancient historiographers. The first to name here is certainly

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<sup>1</sup> For more informations about the history of the *Agrippina* see Dean / Knapp 114 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Grimani was an interesting person who played an important role in the church as well as in the political life of his time. He was a cardinal and a diplomat and for a time served as an ambassador of the German Emperor at the Vatican and (since 1708) as the Vice King of the House of Habsburg in Naples, which had just been wrested of Pope Clement XI in the course of the War of the Spanish Succession. In this great European conflict, the Pontiff had sided with France, so that Cardinal Grimani became his fierce political enemy. Not without reason the play is therefore sometimes regarded as satirizing the conditions at the papal court of Clement XI, which Grimani knew very well from own experience (note that Claudius once calls himself the „Jove of Rome“).

Publius Cornelius Tacitus (56/57 – after 120 AD), who in his *Annals* describes the period from the death of Augustus (14 AD) until the death of Nero (68 AD). Tacitus was himself a member of the Senate, the institutional body, that in theory was still governing the Roman empire, and he performed a career as a high magistrate (perhaps a man like Busenello, a highly successful jurist, diplomat and statesman, will have seen some parallels to his own life ...). In writing the history of the Roman empire up to his own days, he strikes a pessimistic note: The liberty of the ancient Republic, bringing still forth a Cato and a Cicero, had made place for the servility of the citizens reduced to mere subjects and for the terror of powerful monarchs, who sometimes even verged on the psychopathic. Tacitus gives the outlines of this sombre picture by masterful command of language and style as well as of colourful and suggestive composition, achieving to be esteemed even nowadays as the most important historiographer of the Roman world. It was just the period of the Renaissance and of Early Baroque which saw Tacitus as a congenial analyst of human psychology, and mostly of its dark sides, which were believed to be constitutive for the course of world history in a period of towering personalities, of ruthless princes and *condottieri*, in a period, which still resounded of the political thoughts of a thinker like Machiavelli.

Besides Tacitus, C. Suetonius Tranquillus must be mentioned as an important historical source. His biographies of the emperors, the *Vitae Caesarum*, written most likely in the third decade of the 2nd century AD, provide an abundance of anecdotes. Being a secretary to the emperor Hadrianus for some time, he was in a comfortable position to supply himself with material about the recent past directly from the archives. Unlike as in the case of Tacitus, however, we will hesitate to rank Suetonius as a serious historian<sup>3</sup>. It can definitely be shown that he chose his material tendentiously, according to certain purposes inherent in the literary genre of biography which resulted of moral judgements on the persons described. For this kind of „historiographical“ literature does not aim chiefly at historical objectivity, no matter whether this can really be achieved or not, but at judging a person's character according to certain criteria and standard patterns. From this rather selective method results the impression of the anecdotal, at times even sensational, which makes reading of course very interesting, but at the same time requires some caution, when we ask for the value of this sort of literature as a source for history.

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<sup>3</sup> The most recent state of research is given by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill: Suetonius. The Scholar and His Caesars (London 1983).

Last, but by no means least we must mention two Greek authors: Cassius Dio, a high magistrate in Rome too, who around 200 AD wrote a *Roman History* in 80 books, shaping an overall negative image of the reign of Nero<sup>4</sup>; second, an eyewitness of the contemporary events, the Jewish politician Flavius Josephus, who served as a military commander of the insurgents in the Jewish War of 66 AD and afterwards lived as a historian in the Rome of the Flavian emperors<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Dio is at the same the one who is most remote from the events he describes; thus, it appears that over the time the tendency increases to a negative estimation of the Neronian period. Most scholars agree nowadays that Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio recur independently to contemporary historiographical and biographical sources. Certainly, the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* is one of these models. Others are (partly named by Tacitus): the biography of Thrasea Paetus, written by his friend Arulenus Rusticus (tribune 66 AD, in the year of Thrasea's death, consul 92, i.e. under Domitian); Gaius Fannius, whom Pliny, *ep.* V 5 at the occasion of his death in 105/6 tells to have written three books on the *exitus occisorum aut relegatorum a Nerone* which he left incomplete (for the date see Sherwin-White, pp. 34 f.); Pliny gives the further information (*ep.* III 5,6) that his uncle, Pliny the Elder, was the author of historical writings continuing those of Aufidius Bassus (*Historia a fine Aufidi Bassi*), which according to some remarks in Tacitus are likely to have treated the Neronian epoch; we find some rather hostile comments about Nero also in the *Naturalis historia*; Fabius Rusticus, a friend and pupil of Seneca, on whose accounts Tacitus based his narration of the philosopher's death; Cluvius Rufus, the oldest of them all, an important senator and friend of Nero, to whom we owe (as Gavin B. Townend has shown in „The Sources of the Greek in Suetonius“, *Hermes* 88 [1960], 98-120) the passages in Suetonius with Greek quotations. The whole complexed is now discussed by Champlin 36-44; see also Syme: Tacitus 271-303. Tacitus himself in a remarkable passage gives his opinion about his predecessors, *Ann.* XIII 20,2 (while describing an intrigue to remove Afranius Burrus): *Plinius et Cluvius nihil dubitatum de fide praefecti referunt; sane Fabius inclinatus ad laudes Senecae, cuius amicitia floruit. nos consensum auctorum secuturi, quae diversa prodiderint sub nominibus ipsorum trademus.* Even nowadays Tacitus' sources and his way of using them is a topic of controversy. I list a choice of relevant literature: Cesare Questa: *Studi sulle fonti degli Annales di Tacito* (2nd ed. Rome 1967); Dieter Flach: Tacitus und seine Quellen in den Annalenbüchern I-VI, *Athenaeum* 61 (1973), 92-108; id.: Die taciteische Quellenbehandlung in den Annalenbüchern XI-XVI, *Museum Helveticum* 30 (1973), 88-103; Ronald Syme: Tacitus: Some Sources of his Information, in: *Roman Papers IV*, ed. by Anthony R. Birley (Oxford 1982), 199-222; and, recently, Meinolf Vielberg: Über die Art der Quellenbenutzung des Tacitus, in: *Memoria Rerum Veterum. Festschrift für Carl Joachim Classen zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. by Wolfram Ax (Stuttgart 1990), 169-189. Only very rarely does he quote his sources by name (XIV 2,1 f., XV 16,1, XV 53,1 and XV 61,3).

<sup>5</sup> He had been part of an embassy to the imperial court, where he met the empress Poppaea, who used to be rather fond of Judaism; cf. his autobiography, ch. 16, and *Antiquitates Iudaicae* XX 193-195, where he characterizes her as „godfearing“ (θεοσεβής); see Holztrattner 19-21. Despite the negative tendency of his short remarks about Nero's rule he is the only one among the historiographers dealing with critical caution with his fellow authors, who provide the models for the „great“ narration which have come down to us; cf. *Ant.* XX 154

Overall, the baroque opera follows a tradition to adapt the classic historical material very much to its own purpose. A superficial comparison with the ancient sources shows, how freely Grimani's libretto plays with what we think to know about Roman history. Those who are informed about the events of that time will have some difficulties to recognize at least some of them in the confusing intrigue play on imperial power and, even more, on love and jealousy.

Being born and raised in the immediate neighbourhood of the beautiful ancient Roman city of Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium (today Cologne) I must confess I wished I could regard the heroine of the play less negatively than the ancient sources do. That, however, is not so easy. Iulia Agrippina was born in that city of Cologne, which owes to her the formal status of a city according to Roman law (*colonia*) as well as the distinguishing name (*Agrippina*)<sup>6</sup>. She was born in the year 15 AD, the daughter of the popular general Germanicus<sup>7</sup>. After several marriages had foundered<sup>8</sup> and she had been sent to a rather short exile out of Rome, she married her uncle, the emperor Claudius, in 49 AD. When he died in 54 AD (and there were rumours Agrippina herself had hastened his death<sup>9</sup>) and her son Nero ascends the throne, she appears to be at the peak of her power, a position wholly unusual for a woman of that time. She shows herself in public, together with her son, the emperor, she even participates at sessions of the Senate (however hidden behind a curtain)<sup>10</sup>, and, a thing unheard of until then, she lets her portrait be made in face with that of Nero on the front side of coins. But in the course of time she goes too far. Her most important allies, Seneca, the young emperor's tutor, and Burrus, the prefect of the powerful Pretorian Guard, gradually oppose her more and more, and her influence on the young Caesar dwindles, too, and even more rapidly, as she begins to interfere massively with his love affairs<sup>11</sup>. All this, according to

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πολλοὶ γὰρ τὴν περὶ Νέρωνα συντετάχασιν ἱστορίαν, ὧν οἱ μὲν διὰ χάριν εἰς πεπονθότες ὑπ' αὐτοῦ τῆς ἀληθείας ἠμέλησαν, οἱ δὲ διὰ μῖσος καὶ τὴν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀπέχθειαν οὕτως ἀναιδῶς ἐνεπαρόνησαν τοῖς ψεύσμασιν, ὡς ἀξίους αὐτοῦ εἶναι καταγνώσεως.

<sup>6</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* XII,27,1 (with a gibe at the empress even here) *sed Agrippina, quo vim suam sociis quoque nationibus ostentaret, in oppidum Ubiorum, in quo genita erat, veteranos coloniamque deduci impetrat, cui nomen inditum e vocabulo ipsius. ac forte acciderat ut eam gentem Rhenum transgressam avus Agrippa in fidem acciperet.*

<sup>7</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* I,35.

<sup>8</sup> See esp. Suetonius, *Nero* 4-6; for the exile Suetonius, *Cal.* 24 and Cassius Dio LIX 22,6 f.

<sup>9</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* XII,64-67.

<sup>10</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* XIII 5.

<sup>11</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* XIII 12 ff.

the Roman historians, finally leads up to a catastrophe unheard of, in 59 AD: Nero decides to kill his own mother, and the successful plot is approved of and justified subsequently by Burrus and Seneca, who had got their positions by her protection. All that was written in antiquity about the period of Nero sees this atrocity as the decisive turning point of his rule: From that day on things went downhill with Nero, until his fall threatened to carry away the Roman Empire itself into ruin.

So far as the historical facts are concerned, or to be more precise: what the ancient historiographers make us believe about them; I shall later return to this topic. Let us now have a look at what the Baroque librettist makes of it all:

The historical background of Händel / Grimani's opera is the occupation of the British Isles achieved by Claudius in the year 43 AD. This means of course we have to deal here with an impossible twisting of historical facts: At that time Nero, born in 37 AD, was still a little boy, not a rival to his own father in the love of Poppaea, as Grimani will have it; Agrippina was not even Claudius' wife at that moment. Grimani borrows one detail from Suetonius in describing (in a sort of *τειχοσκοπία*) the emperor and his fleet getting into heavy distress while crossing the Channel<sup>12</sup>.

There are some other elements which Grimani took from the classical authors with whom he was no doubt well acquainted. When Agrippina at the end of the opera makes the remark: „Or che regna Neron, moro contenta“ („Now that Nero reigns, I die satisfied“), we remember her (so to speak) „programmatically“ uttering at Tacitus, *Ann.* 14,9,3 *occidat* (sc. *me*), *dum imperet*. The Roman historian has her make this remark in order to testify to her greed of power for herself personally and for her lineage, a greed, which does not know even the limitation of protecting herself against personal annihilation. Agrippina desires power at all risks. By contrast, in the rather positive context of the final scene Grimani awakens a rather harmless impression: Agrippina's reaction is that of mother proud of having provided a good future for her son. Besides, there is no necessity to detect an ominous foreboding in her words in the form they are given here. In Tacitus, it is easy to discover a formal parallel to the (in)famous sentence *oderint, dum metuant* put into the mouth of Caligula by Suetonius, *Cal.* 30,1, which the biographer in turn has taken from Atreus in the play of Accius, Atreus, the archetypical tyrant, who knows no human limitations to his affects (Accius, *Atreus*, fr. X Dangel). More close in content, however, is an uttering of the same Atreus in a play written by Seneca. In the *Thyestes*, vv. 190 f., the despot expresses his ardent desire for the downfall

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Suetonius, *Claud.* 17.

of his hated brother, even at the price of personal annihilation: *haec ipsa pollens incliti Pelopis domus / ruat vel in me, dummodo in fratrem ruat*. Of course, Atreus' aim is a destructive one, as Agrippina's is a positive; but it is just the motif of uncompromizing greed for achieving one's own *raison d'être* that underlies both passages. We may thus conclude that Tacitus, the historian, has made some borrowings from drama, with regard to form as well as content, in order to give a dramatic conclusion to a crucial passage of his narrative. In turn, the baroque librettist borrowed form and content of the *sententia* all the same, and for a similar reason, but he embedded it into the far more friendly context of his play.

It is exactly this topic we have reached now, the „triple reception“, as I would call it, I should like to draw your attention even more close to. As you all will know, according to all of our sources the relation between Nero and his mother is totally different from what Grimani presents us here. Far from being the rather complacent son who makes mummy proud and does not for a moment question her intrigues, the young emperor is universally depicted to live in a great tension with her from the first moment of his rule, a tension, that grows into the unbearable, as Agrippina proceeds to interfere with his private life. Tacitus is the author who in the most dramatical way (both in structure and, as we soon shall see, in other respect, too) leads this uneasy relationship to a bloody culmination point throughout the 13th book of his *Annals* and brings about the explosion at the very beginning of book XIV: *Diu meditatatum scelus non ultra Nero distulit ... flagrantior in dies amore Poppaeae, quae sibi matrimonium et discidium Octaviae incolumi Agrippina haud sperans etc.*

An attempt to murder Agrippina by means of a specially prepared yacht in the Gulf of Naples fails. But Agrippina knows that now little more is left to her than waiting for the end. And indeed, Nero takes council with Seneca and Burrus, who approve of the plan. When the emperor sends troop of soldiers to carry out the murder, the following scene unfolds before the eyes of the reader: *iam in mortem centurioni ferrum destringenti protendens uterum 'ventrem feri' exclamavit*<sup>13</sup>.

Certainly, we do not read here Agrippina's authentic „last words“; rather Tacitus wants her outcry to signify an accusation against Nero, her son, whom she had born in her womb (*venter*) and who is now so eager to take her life. It is the Greek Cassius Dio who later makes this motif expressedly clear: *παῖε ... ταύτην ..., ὅτε Νέρωνα ἔτεκεν*<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ann.* XIV 8,5.

<sup>14</sup> LXI 13,5.

Now it is interesting to see that Tacitus doesn't content himself with arranging the events in an order to be felt as a dramatic development; here he goes even further, borrowing consciously from the literary genre of drama. We find one conspicuous parallel in the *Octavia praetexta*, long thought to have been written by Seneca; the parallelization between the dramatic and the historiographical text have already been noticed, but no sufficient consequences have been made of it. The *Octavia*, as Rolando Ferri makes explicit in his recent great commentary to this play, is part of the anti-Neronian polemics which started shortly after the death of Nero. The ascription itself of the play to Seneca (who appears in person on the scene as the most positive antipod of the despotic Nero) shows the close relation to the „hagiography“ of the Neronian martyr Seneca initiated possibly by Seneca's friend and pupil Fabius Rusticus after the death of the persons involved<sup>15</sup>. By the way, Busenello for his *Incoronazione di Poppea* has adopted his Nero, the ruthless tyrant, from the *Octavia*, Seneca being his counterpart on the stage and (as in Tacitus) in the end put to death by his former pupil.

In the *Octavia*, a choral ode describes in full the murder of Agrippina: *caedis moriens illa ministrum / rogat infelix, / utero dirum condat ut ensem: / 'hic est, hic est fodiendus' ait / 'ferro, monstrum qui tale tulit'*<sup>16</sup>.

Dio „translates“ the explaining relative clause; Tacitus leaves it out, obviously because he thought the allusion to the well-known *praetexta* to be sufficient.

In the course of attempts to date the genuine Senecan tragedies and to explain them in a contemporary political context (mainly with regard to the relation of Seneca to his difficult pupil) another parallel has been brought forth. In Seneca's *Oedipus*, in the scene following the catastrophic revelations, Iocasta exclaims desperately: *utrumne pectori infigam meo / telum an patenti conditum iugulo inprimam? / eligere nescis vulnus: hunc, dextra, hunc pete / uterum capacem, qui virum et gnatos tulit'*<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Ferri, esp. pp. 9 ff.; see also George W.M. Harrison in his recension on Ferri, BMCR 2005.02.27: „The bias of the historical sources against Nero is noted; it should also have been added that all of the sources are after the *Octavia* and so if there is any borrowing it is by the historians (for which a credible case has been made for Tacitus)“ and the studies of Schmidt, Manuwald, Wilson, and Beck listed in the biography below.

<sup>16</sup> *Oct.* 368-372.

<sup>17</sup> *Oed.* 1036-1039; see Charles Segal: *Oedipus tyrannus. Tragic heroism and the limits of knowledge* (2nd ed. Oxford / New York 2001), 21 and Francesca Santoro L'Hoir: *Tragedy, rhetoric, and the historiography of Tacitus' Annales* (Ann Arbor 2006), 91.

As the unknown poet of the *Octavia* very often and very consciously quotes from Seneca's tragedies, you might think at first sight he could have transferred this motif from the Senecan *Oedipus* into the *Octavia*. It has always been tried to interpret Seneca's tragedies as protest, political or at least morally, against Nero and to decode the partly monstrous rulers who haunt the Senecan theatre as representing the contemporary Roman emperors in mythical masks, so to speak. However, attempts to equate Nero with an Atreus or an Oedipus never got very far until today, beyond speculations and the commonplace, that in all these cases, in the legendary ones as well as in the real one, we are dealing with tyrants and psychopaths – at least if we take our sources literally at first sight. But in the case of the death of Agrippina it is obvious that the similarities remain merely superficial. For even if you think the worst of him Nero in fact does not resemble Oedipus very much, no matter if you have only a superficial view on Oedipus' tragic fate as being a series of monstrous crimes against the laws of nature and thus take serious at least one of the popular incriminations against the emperor, to have committed incest with his mother (Nero cannot seriously be made responsible, in the „Oedipus-style“, for the murder of his adoptive father Claudius; in reality, it was Iocasta-Agrippina, who slay Laius-Claudius). All this should not be seen as modern arrogance against the naïveté of the ancients. For our sources already make a connection between Nero and Oedipus only once. Tacitus does not know about it at all; Suetonius once mentions Nero to have appeared on stage in the role of Oedipus *inter alia* (Nero 21,3), and in another passage (Nero 46,3) he underlines as remarkable the fact that this appears to have been the last role the emperor ever played: *observatum etiam fuerat novissimam fabulam cantasse eum publice Oedipodem exulem atque in hoc desisse versu: 'θανεῖν μ' ἄνωγε σύγγαμος, μήτηρ, πατήρ'*.

Now as far as we are concerned we could find it remarkable that Suetonius obviously quotes the verse with a tendentious altering; Dio gives it, in far better accordance with the legend, as οἰκτρῶς θανεῖν μ' ἄνωγε σύγγαμος πατήρ<sup>18</sup>. Suetonius is also alluding only to the rumour (which seems to have been persistent) of the incest, of Oedipus-Nero sharing with his father Claudius the partner, Agrippina, as σύγγαμος. Therefore, the relation of the Oedipus legend with Nero respectively to the political polemics against him can only be a very tiny one, and the fact that Tacitus leaves it aside completely, should forbid us to think of it as a possible source of inspiration for his work<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Dio LXIII 28,5 = TGF II F 8 (adesp.).

<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, the emperor is compared in polemical satire to the „classic“ matricides of Greek legend, Orestes and Alcmaeon; these verses are preserved by Suetonius, Nero 39,2 *multa Graece Latineque proscripta aut vulgata sunt, sicut illa: Νέρων Ὀρέστης Ἀλκμείων μητροκτόνος. / νεόψηφον· Νέρων ἰδίαν μητέρα ἀπέκτεινε;*

There remains a certain formal similarity between the Senecan and Pseudo-Senecan verses and Tacitus' narrative, and this similarity consists in a dramatic effect achieved by some rhetoric: that the female womb must be seen as harbouring an ominous force (according to the individual point of view) and therefore must be „punished“, so to speak, by a deathly stroke. It is not necessary to seek far to find the source of Seneca's inspiration: His own father in one of his *Controversiae* notes a sentence which sounds almost the same. There a tyrant having a woman tortured makes the following command: *caede ventrem, ne tyrannicidas pariat*<sup>20</sup>. But we recognize at once, that the similarities with the story of the *Oedipus*-tragedy are used up with this effect: The context is totally different. The same must of course be said, and even more so, of the recurrence of the motif in the *Octavia*, where the sense is just the opposite: It is Nero who is cursed as a tyrant. Therefore we may even ask, whether the motif in the *Octavia* is taken directly and consciously at all from Seneca's *Oedipus*. It might also be assumed that the anonymous poet had drawn on the anti-Neronian historiographical sources, which are lost to us. Anyway, even then the form of the motif we have before us (the own womb as the cause of disaster for the person speaking) would be immediately prefigured in the Senecan drama. And one thing is certain: The only complete correspondence between form and contents is found in the *Octavia* and in Tacitus (and, later and even closer, in Cassius Dio). So at this highly dramatical moment of their respective narrative both historians not only compose in a dramatical style, but deliberately recur to quoting a piece of literature which we actually know to be a drama – because in formal dramatic as well as in contents it is most aptly fitting to their purpose. And there is one thing more to be underlined: We can only understand the exclamation, in the ominous brevity given by Tacitus, if we have the underlying subtext already in mind. As we have seen, only the *Octavia* comes into question to be this subtext; by the way, this is one of the main criteria by which to date this play.

Now we ask ourselves, perhaps with some bewilderment: Agrippina, Nero, the whole entourage of the Roman imperial court – is the image the baroque librettist paints before us, the bizarre play of intrigues about erotics and power, already drawn by the „serious“ historiographers of antiquity, according to a definite purpose of political and moral denigration of the persons in question? Is our conception of the historical “reality” of this period, about a Caligula or a Nero conceived as beasts in human form, is it not a “knowledge” we got by reading the classical historians, at school or otherwise? Has not this view on

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again, Tacitus has nothing of this sort. According to Suetonius, *Nero* 21,3 Nero appeared on the stage also as *Orestes matricida*.

<sup>20</sup> Seneca Rhetor, *Contr.* II 5,7.

Roman imperial history even become more fashionably canonized by modern films and historical novels, to give an example, by the unforgettable Peter Ustinov rolling his eyes in frenzy and playing the lyre watching burning Rome, which he himself had set on fire?

Regrettably, we do not know the opinion of Busenello or Grimani on the obvious sensationalism of their “serious” Roman sources. But I can offer you instead some remarks of a librettist, who worked at the same time for Händel in his early years in Hamburg. These remarks show a remarkable awareness of the problems just discussed. February 25th in the year of 1705 the opera house Opernhaus “Am Gänsemarkt” in Hamburg, one of the leading musical theatres of the period, saw the first performance of Händel’s opera “Love achieved by blood and murder. Or: Nero”. Unfortunately, Händel’s music has been lost. His librettist, Friedrich Christian Feustking, in a preface makes some detailed statements concerning his adaptation of the ancient authors. Obviously, Feustking, who had studied theology in Wittenberg, must be regarded as very learned in classical literature. In an unusual manner for his time he doubts all the rumours about Nero having ordered to burn Rome down as well as the tales about the incest of Nero and Agrippina and the ambiguous circumstances of Poppaea’s violent death, which he supposes to be “darkened by the incongruences of the ancient historians”. These colours, already sombre, the baroque librettist would only have to vary according to the taste of his audience –which Feustking does not hold in very high esteem as far as the ability for historical criticism is concerned<sup>21</sup>.

Dealing with the relationship between Nero and Agrippina Tacitus more often than usual applies his method of insinuation, of inserting *rumores* specifically into his narrative pretending to render different opinions in an impartial manner; cf. esp. *Ann.* XIII 13,2:

*tum Agrippina versis artibus per blandimenta iuvenem adgredi, suum potius cubiculum ac sinum offerre contegendis, quae prima aetas et summa fortuna expeterent*

and XIV 2:

*trahit Cluvius ardore retinendae Agrippinam potentiae eo usque provectam ut medio diei, cum id temporis Nero per vinum et epulas incalesceret, offerret se saepius temulento comptam et incesto paratam.*

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<sup>21</sup> Feustking’s „Vorrede“ is reprinted, together with the libretto as a whole, in the Händel-Jahrbuch 23 (1977), 75-77.

In this case he would even be particularly able to justify his insertion of rumours, because naturally there were no witnesses to the private dealings of mother and son. The historian's authority gained so great a success that even so monstrous a reproach as the incest remained sticking in the memory of an all too credulous posterity. Similar *topoi* of slander are long enough to raise suspicion about their credibility. Doubts of this sort are stirred when these *topoi* are used suspiciously often for political defamation against whomsoever – a sort of slander easily uttered because afterwards no one would be able to test it.

Reproaches of this kind are directed already against Caligula, cf. Suetonius, who abuses even Augustus at the same time:

*praedicabat autem matrem suam ex incesto, quod Augustus cum Iulia filia admisisset, procreatam ... (24) cum omnibus sororibus suis consuetudinem stupri fecit ... ex iis Drusillam vitiasse virginem praetextatus adhuc creditur<sup>22</sup>.*

So up to now we already see three emperors having committed such monstrosities, “good ones” (like Augustus) and „bad ones“ (like Caligula and Nero) – not to speak of the almost identical stories the *Historia Augusta* tells about such events in the families of Marcus Aurelius and Septimius Severus (cf. *HA* VII 5,8-11, VII 3,7, X 21,7, and XIII 10,1 f.). Here we find astonishing parallels to the description of Nero's life also in other aspects (fratricide, debaucheries at night in ill-famed pubs). This parallelism of narrative is of course a convincing proof of the credibility of these reproaches<sup>23</sup>!

But these are not the only amazing parallels. It has been recognized for long but not sufficiently valued in its consequences that half-legendary as well as historical persons of antiquity show a remarkable likeness to Nero. We read similar stories about Periander, the Corinthian tyrant of the beginning of the sixth century BC, who is reputed as one of the Seven Sages as well as the archetype of the despotic ruler, who amongst other things planned to dig a canal through the Isthmus of Corinth<sup>24</sup>. As we all know, several centuries later a Roman *princeps* took up this idea anew – Nero<sup>25</sup>. Here too the negative view on this plan, most

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<sup>22</sup> *Cal.* 23 f.

<sup>23</sup> Many examples are discussed by Werner A. Krenkel: *Sex und politische Biographie*, *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Wilhelm-Pieck-Universität Rostock* 29 (1980), 65-76 = *Naturalia non turpia*. *Sex and gender in ancient Greece and Rome*. *Schriften zur antiken Kultur- und Sexualwissenschaft*, ed. by Christiane Reitz and Wolfgang Bernard (Hildesheim 2006), 233-263.

<sup>24</sup> Diogenes Laertius I 99.

<sup>25</sup> Suetonius, *Nero* 19,2 and Cassius Dio LXIII 16.

fiercedly uttered by Dio, who lists a lot of bad *omina* in describing Nero's project, does not come as a surprise. Economically it surely was quite sensible but the anti-Neronian Roman authors represent it as an attack on nature. Both rulers, Periander as well as Nero, had already been the objects of allegations that they had broken the laws of nature by the incest with their mothers<sup>26</sup>, and with that, as it were, a violation of "Mother Earth" by technical means had been ominously predicted<sup>27</sup>. Thus it seemed the obvious thing to connect the canal project too with the Periander tradition. The story in the form in which it is applied to the historical persons does not recur in historiography but in a piece of novelistic literature from the time of the Late Roman Republic: the 17th tale of the Ἐρωτικὰ παθήματα of Parthenius:

λέγεται δὲ καὶ Περιάνδρον τὸν Κορίνθιον τὴν μὲν ἀρχὴν ἐπεικῆ τε καὶ πρᾶον εἶναι, ὕστερον δὲ φονικώτερον γενέσθαι δι' αἰτίαν τήνδε. ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ κοιμηθεὶς νέου πολλῶ <πόθῳ> κατείχετο κτλ. (1) ... κατιδὼν τὴν μητέρα ὥρμησεν ἐπὶ τὸ διεργάσασθαι αὐτήν ... κάκ τούτου παραπλήξ ἦν νοῦ τε καὶ φρενῶν κατέσκηψέ τε εἰς ὠμότητα καὶ πολλοὺς ἀπέσφαξε τῶν πολιτῶν (6 f., after Periander has discovered his mother Crateia has had intercourse with him, her identity being veiled by darkness)

Novelistic reminiscences are also present in the gloomy story about the death of the pregnant Poppaea, whom Nero is said to have killed by kicking her into the belly in a fit of rage<sup>28</sup>. As we find the same story in almost the same words in Diogenes Laertius<sup>29</sup> and again

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<sup>26</sup> For Periander, see Diogenes Laertius I 96, referring to Aristippus' Περὶ παλαιᾶς τρυφῆς.

<sup>27</sup> For this wandering motif, cf. the story of Semiramis and Ninyas told by Iustinus, *Epitome* I 12, a parallel which was first discussed by Krappe 468 (cf. also Ctesias, FGrHist 688 F 1,20, Diodorus Siculus II 7 and 20,1-3 and the mythographer Conon, FGrHist 26 F 1,9, preserved by Photius, *Bibl.* 186 p. 132 a f., who makes an interesting remark about the „exchangeability“ of legends of this sort); further, in Roman history, a dream of Julius Caesar either during his time as a quaestor in Spain, Suetonius, *Iul.* 7 *etiam confusum eum somnio proximae noctis – nam visus erat per quietem stuprum matri intulisse – coiectores ad amplissimam spem incitaverunt arbitrium terrarum orbis portendi interpretantes, quando mater, quam subiectam sibi vidisset, non alia esset quam terra, quae omnium parens haberetur*, or, more dramatically, in the night before crossing the Rubico, Plutarch, *Caesar* 32 λέγεται δὲ τῇ προτέρῃ νυκτὶ τῆς διαβάσεως ὄναρ ἰδεῖν ἕκθεσμον· ἐδόκει γὰρ αὐτὸς τῇ ἑαυτοῦ μητρὶ μείγνυσθαι τὴν ἄρρητον μείξιν.

<sup>28</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* XVI 6,1 *Poppaea mortem obiit fortuita mariti iracundia, a quo gravida ictu calcis adflicta est. neque enim venenum crediderim, quamvis quidam scriptores tradant, odio magis quam ex fide: quippe liberorum cupiens et amori uxoris obnoxius erat*; Suetonius, *Nero* 35,3 *ictu calcis occidit, quod se ex aurigatione sero reversum gravida et aegra conviciis incesserat*; Dio LXII 27,4 κρούση γὰρ αὐτῇ λάξ, εἴτε ἐκὼν εἴτε καὶ

in a novelist, Chariton<sup>30</sup>, of the first century BC, we are indeed inclined to say with the words of Roland Mayer: „we are asked to believe that history repeats itself“ – or rather: „that stories repeat themselves.“ Herodotus had already told the same story not only about Periander<sup>31</sup>, but also about the Persian king Cambyses whom he says to have killed his own wife because he was angry about reproaches, as in the case of Nero; he too is an impersonation of the type of the mad tyrant<sup>32</sup>.

In the time after Nero one more prominent person is rebuked for just the same misdeed: Herodes Atticus<sup>33</sup> – who is also numbered to the company of those who are said to have planned the building of the canal through the Isthmus<sup>34</sup>!

Thus a wandering motif, taken not alone from the novelistic passages of earlier historiography but, as substantial similarities show, from novelistic literature itself forms the basis of the rumours about Nero's private life<sup>35</sup>. The fact that Tacitus gives room to these rumours at important places in his narrative must therefore not at all be regarded as proof for their historical credibility but just the other way as an indication for how much he was striving

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ἄκων, ἐνέδορον. See Mayer 249: “If someone wanted to make of Nero the Roman Periander, it may be that poor Poppaea, without her husband's help, miscarried and died.”

<sup>29</sup> I 94 (about Periander and his wife Melissa) χρόνῳ δὴ ὑπ' ὀργῆς βαλὼν ὑποβάθρῳ ἢ λακτίσας τὴν γυναῖκα ἔγκυον οὖσαν ἀπέκτεινε, πεισθεὶς διαβολαῖς παλλακίδων, ἃς ὕστερον ἔκαυσε.

<sup>30</sup> *Chaireas and Callirhoe* I 4,12 (Chaireas lends his ear to slanders that Callirhoe is betraying him:) ὁ δὲ φωνὴν μὲν οὐκ ἔσχεν ὥστε λοιδορήσασθαι, κρατούμενος δὲ ὑπὸ τῆς ὀργῆς ἐλάκτισε προσιούσαν. εὐστόχως οὖν ὁ ποῦς κατὰ τοῦ διαφράγματος ἐνεχθεὶς ἐπέσχε τῆς παιδὸς τὴν ἀναπνοήν.

<sup>31</sup> Herodotus III 50,1

<sup>32</sup> Herodotus III 32,4.

<sup>33</sup> In the third century AD by Philostratus, *Vitae sophistarum* II p. 555 πληγείσαν δὲ ἐς τὴν γαστέρα τὴν γυναῖκα ἀποθανεῖν ἐν ὤμῳ τῷ τόκῳ.

<sup>34</sup> Philostratus, *Vitae sophistarum* II p. 552, where the motif of hybris is apparent: ἡ δὲ τοῦ Ἴσθμου τομὴ ἔργον ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀπιστούμενον τῇ φύσει, δοκεῖ γάρ μοι τὸ ῥῆξιαι τὸν Ἴσθμὸν Ποσειδῶνος δεῖσθαι ἢ ἀνδρός.

<sup>35</sup> This fact is not at all unusual for ancient biographical writings in general; see Champlin 109; Walter Ameling: Tyrannen und schwangere Frauen, *Historia* 35 (1986), 507 f.; Janet Fairweather: Fictions in the biographies of ancient writers, *Ancient Society* 5 (1974), 231-275, e.g. 270: „We quite often find in the *Lives* [of Greek poets] stories for which there a close parallels in heroic mythology and romantic fiction“ and 272: „Popular legend, throughout the Hellenistic period and right into the time of the Roman Empire, liked to surround the lives of men of genius with marvels“ and, in general, Schwartz 124 and Treu (see the bibliography below).

to confer as much as possible of traditional tyrant topic upon his object with the help of the *rumores*<sup>36</sup>.

This method of writing appears to be typical of Tacitus who in this respect stands for a great part of ancient historiography. In writing history dramatization is achieved not only by means of the writers' art but frequently also by direct recourse to fictional literature, dramatic poetry as well as the novel. Not without reason Tacitus has been called „not the last of the great ancient historians, but the last of the great ancient poets“<sup>37</sup>. Casting a somewhat dubious light on the authority of the Roman historiographer as a historical source, this fact makes obvious his motives: In ancient historiography the emotional relations of the acting persons among themselves and towards the powers of fate are given priority over rational analysis of political, social or economical matters which stand in the centre of attention in modern historical research. This is valid especially for cases in which can sufficiently be proved that motifs of this kind have been adopted indeed directly from fictional literature, as we have seen in the case of the *Octavia*. To examine critically these strategies of writing may help to sharpen the awareness for certain distortions of historical truth by the art of writing, skilful as it may be, and to discover the instances at which telling history turns into telling stories – then and now.

As for the writers, who composed the texts for the baroque operas, they would normally not ask, whether the material they worked with was already stamped by a tendency to follow certain literary strategies. The opera of Händel and Grimani, as well as other works of that time, obviously followed totally different aims. Far from being interested in representing the factual historical and political development, as it can be shown by critical analysis, they tend to offer a thrilling play to an educated public, full of personal, mostly erotical complexities<sup>38</sup>. We must remember the date of the performance: In the tradition of Venice, the very days after Christmas were the immediate starting point of a season of carnivalesque merrymaking, and

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<sup>36</sup> For the important role of rumours in forming public (and popular) opinion of that period see Israel Shatzman: Tacitean Rumours, *Latomus* 33 (1974), 549-578 and recently Egon Flaig: Wie Kaiser Nero die Akzeptanz bei der Plebs urbana verlor. Eine Fallstudie zum politischen Gerücht im Prinzipat, *Historia* 52,3 (2003), 351-372.

<sup>37</sup> Schwartz 125: „den man nicht den letzten großen antiken Historiker, wohl aber den letzten großen antiken Dichter nennen sollte“. See also Müller 54: „Dieser grundlegende Unterschied zur Geschichtsschreibung der Neuzeit rechtfertigt die Anwendung des Novellenbegriffs auf entsprechende historiographische Texte der Antike.“

<sup>38</sup> Manuwald 161 f.

this made its strong mark on the programs which were to be expected in an opera house<sup>39</sup>. So it does not come as a surprise that – in total opposition to the historians' texts – the end of the operas is mostly a happy end<sup>40</sup>. Morals of true love triumph over the greed for power (in any case, this holds for the persons depicted as “noble” characters), and accordingly entertainment prevails over philosophical or political analysis. As I hope to have shown, however, this effect can be seen even in our most serious Roman historiographers. The “triple reception” I tried to describe (historiography borrowing from drama and fictional literature in general, baroque opera drawing on both, but being most strongly influenced by the fictional elements of historiography) in this context could achieve the most cherished appeal of a *ludus* – but of a *ludus doctus*.

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<sup>39</sup> Rosand 14.

<sup>40</sup> Concerning this „fine lieto“ see Barthold Feind's „Vorbericht“ to his „Lucretia“ („Deutsche Gedichte“, see the bibliography below, 186): „Bey unsern Zeiten ist die Gewohnheit, Trauer-Spiele mit einem fröhlichen Ausgange aufzuführen, schier zu einer Richtschnur geworden, ob wol Aristoteles die andere Art, um das Mitleiden zu vergrößern, vorziehet“.

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