The Differing Representations of Imperial Women by Plutarch and Tacitus

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Introduction

My research examines and compares the differing portrayals of imperial women by ancient historians, Plutarch and Tacitus. Many scholars have discussed the ways in which they portrayed imperial women within Roman history. However, what I discovered is a lack of explanation for why their depictions of these women were so different.

The main question I seek to answer throughout my research is, why did these two historians, writing during the same time period, portray imperial women so differently?

Plutarch

Plutarch lived from 45-120 B.C.E. He was a Greek citizen who gained Roman citizenship.

Plutarch wrote to morally influence Roman and Greek people. He was optimistic that his work would serve as a mirror to Roman and Greek people, to better themselves.

It is clear in his writings that he recognized women as more than simple, one-dimensional characters.

In one passage, Plutarch described Octavia, 4th wife of Antony, as a “great beauty” who also “had intelligence and dignity.” When discussing Cleopatra, he blames Antony for becoming too engrossed with Cleopatra, rather than blaming her for negatively influencing him.

Historical Context

Nero, written about in Tacitus, was emperor from 54-68 C.E. Then followed the Year of the Four Emperors (69 C.E.), which included Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian. Vespasian was the first of the Flavian Dynasty (69 - 96 C.E.), then Titus and Domitian. The Nerva-Antonine Dynasty (96-192 C.E.) followed, however, Plutarch and Tacitus only lived to see Nerva, Trajan, and Hadrian in power.

In the first century, women had more power than before. They were allowed to manage their own business and financial affairs. They could also own, inherit, or dispose of property. Imperial women were meant to stay out of public affairs, but many still held influence over their powerful male relatives.

Tacitus

Tacitus lived from 56-117 B.C.E. He was a senator under Emperor Domitian.

Tacitus wrote to place blame for what Roman society had become prior to, and during, his time. He viewed the Roman Republic with reverence, and his own society with contempt.

Tacitus desired to prevent Rome from repeating its past mistakes. One such mistake, as evidenced in his Annals, was the influence of imperial women on the powerful men of Rome.

Agrippina the Younger, mother of Nero, as Tacitus recounts, was so eager to prevent a relationship between Nero and Poppaea Sabina that she used seduction to persuade him against it. What Tacitus does not state, however, is that Nero was married, and this relationship could ruin important alliances for him.

Conclusion

When my research began over a year ago, it looked very different. I started with the idea that women had been marginalized within the writings of ancient historians. It changed almost entirely when I discovered one historian who offered a fairer portrayal of women.

Now, my focus has been to fill the hole left by an absence of comparative scholarship of two of the most influential Roman historians. Their writings have shaped our ideas of many famous Romans, women included, and I wanted to know why they were so different.

With this research I hope to contribute a significant and original argument to the discussion of Roman imperial women and the historians who represented them.

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