



Reflection

On the Ethics in Monteverdi's Coronation of Poppaea

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Citation: Kralj-Iglič V, Prelovšek A. On the Ethics in Monteverdi's Coronation of Poppea. Proceedings of Socratic Lectures. 2025, 12(II), 205–211. <https://doi.org/10.55295/PSL.12.2025.II22>

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Abstract:

We reflect on the scope and design of the opera Coronation of Poppaea composed by Claudio Monteverdi according to the libretto of Francesco Busonello that was first performed in 1654 during the carnival period in Venice. Matching timeless music, the opera is distinguished also by poetic lyrics on Fortune, Virtue and, in particular, Love. Surprisingly, the story is related to historic persons – Roman empress Sabina Poppaea the Younger (Poppaea) and emperor Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (Nero). As reports on Nero indicate multiple murders, including murders of those that were closest to him, the libretto rises questions on the necessity of Virtue in achieving happiness. Our considerations indicate that the main characters in the opera are ethically sound, however, the artistic changes have made them essentially different from the underlying real persons.

Keywords: Baroque opera; Roman history; Venice carnival; Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus; Sabina Poppaea the Younger; Commedia del Arte

1. Historical considerations

In composing the evidences on Poppaea and Nero, we rely on writings of historians Tacitus (56–cca 120) (Tacitus, 115–120), Suetonius (cca 69–122), (Suetonius, 121) and Lucius Cassius Dio (165–235):

1.1. *On Nero*

For most of this period, Roman emperors were chosen according to hereditary rule: they were born in the right family. The empire started through violence and depended on force. Civil war had brought Caesar to power. Once emperor and without an heir, he had adopted Augustus and thereby established hereditary succession. However, the society was harsh and emperors could only survive if their people believed they could outforce anyone and everyone.

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (Nero) was born in 37 to Julia Agrippina (Agrippina the Younger) and Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus. He was three when his father died. Agrippina the Younger became the third wife of emperor Tiberius Claudius Nero Germanicus (Claudius) in 49 and Claudius adopted Nero who became Claudius' eldest son and the heir to the empire. Annaeus Seneca, a member of the senate, was appointed to educate him. After the death of Claudius in 54, Nero became emperor. At the beginning, he ruled under a strong influence of his mother but with time, he became an absolutist and a tyrant. He was overthrown by Servius Sulpicius Galba and Marcus Salvius Otho and committed suicide at the age of 30 in 68.

Agrippina the Younger was the daughter, the sister, the wife and the mother of emperors. She was displaying her position as an equal partner in the power gained by her ancestors. Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 12: "Everything was subject to the control of a woman. Rome was now enslaved by a controlling and almost masculine dominance. In public, Agrippina showed a serious, often arrogant face; in private, there was no sign of immorality, unless it helped her in her search for power; she had an enormous desire for money which was excused with the reason that money was a means to power."

1.2. *On Nero's marriages*

A marriage was arranged between Nero (then 16) and Claudius' daughter Claudia Octavia (then 13) in 53. Since the two were legally brother and sister, Octavia had to be adopted into another family before Nero could marry her. It was implied that this marriage was never consummated and there were no children. By arranging the marriage between Claudia Octavia and Nero, Agrippina and Claudius gave an advantage to Claudius' daughter over his son.

In about 58, Nero began an affair with the aristocratic woman Poppaea Sabina (her parents were Poppaea Sabina the Elder and Titus Ollius) who was 7 years older than him and had been married earlier to Rufrius Crispus and then to M. Salvus Otho. Nero's affair with Poppaea raised the question of divorce from Octavia. Agrippina's determination to preserve the dynastic marriage that she and Claudius had arranged induced struggles between her and Nero. Nero attempted to assassinate his mother several times and when that failed, he had her executed for treason.

When Poppaea Sabina got pregnant, Nero divorced Octavia with the reason that she was unable to give him an heir. Octavia was sent to Campania, and twelve days later Nero married Poppaea (Suetonius). However, Octavia remained a threat as the previous emperor's daughter. Admiral Anicetus, who had collaborated also in Agrippina the Younger's murder, confessed to an affair with Octavia and she was suffocated and beheaded in 62.

Poppaea and Nero's daughter Claudia Augusta was born in 63, but she died at the age of only four months and Nero deified her. In 65, Poppaea became pregnant again, but miscarried and died thereafter at the age of 35. "Poppaea died from casual outburst of rage in her husband, who felled her with a kick when she was pregnant. Her body was not consumed by fire according to Roman usage, but after the custom of foreign princes was filled with fragrant spices and embalmed, and then consigned to the sepulchre of the Julii. She had, however, a public funeral, and Nero himself from the rostra eulogized her beauty,

her lot in having been the mother of a deified child, and fortune's other gifts, as though they were virtues". (Tacitus). Poppaea Sabina also perished at this time through an act of Nero's; either accidentally or intentionally he had leaped upon her with his feet while she was pregnant. (Cassius Dio, Epitome of Book LXII.27.4) After the close of the festival, Poppaea met her end through a chance outburst of anger on the part of her husband, who felled her with a kick during pregnancy. (Tacitus, Annals XVI.6.1).

Since Nero still had no heir, he promptly set about finding another wife after Poppaea's death. Suetonius reports that he considered marrying Claudia Antonia, the daughter of Claudius and his second wife Aelia Paetina and half-sister of Octavia Claudia that he had divorced and executed three years earlier. When Antonia refused this proposal, Nero had her executed. Nero, meanwhile, contracted his third marriage in 65, to Statilia Messalina. Messalina had been married to the consul Vestinus, whom Nero executed for involvement in Piso's coup. This marriage also produced no children.

1.4. Reports on Nero

Compared to today's rich records, the written evidences on Nero and his contemporaries are scarce. Historians Tacitus (56–cca 120), who was for some years the only Nero's contemporary, and Suetonius (cca 69–122) could still experience the impact of Nero while Lucius Cassius Dio (165–235) lived a century after the death of Nero.

At first, Suetonius exposes positive facts on Nero: As a boy, Nero was interested in almost all the literary and artistic subjects; but his mother kept him from philosophy, warning him that it was unsuitable for a future emperor. Seneca, his teacher, stopped him from reading works by the earliest orators, in order to make his admiration for Seneca himself last longer. In the game of Troy at the circus games, he gave a very good performance which was well-received. He happily turned his attention to poetry and wrote poems quite easily, and he did not, as some think, publish others' works as his own. There have come into my hands notebooks and papers with some well-known poems of his, written in his own handwriting so that it is clear that they were not copied or noted down when someone was speaking, but rather noted down by him while he himself was thinking and composing. There are many examples of words and phrases rubbed out or written over and added to or written above. He also had a considerable interest in painting and sculpture.

He began his reign with an appearance of family loyalty and duty. At a splendid and expensive funeral, he spoke in praise of Claudius, and then deified him. He gave the greatest honours to the memory of his father Domitius. He let his mother manage everything, public and private. On the first day of his reign, he even gave to the tribune on guard-duty the password "The Best of Mothers", and afterwards he often rode with her through the streets in her litter.

Suetonius then moves onto a devastating attack on Nero's character: There is a story that Seneca dreamt that he was teaching Gaius Caesar [Caligula], and Nero soon gave proof that the dream was real, when he showed his natural cruelty early on in his life. Because his brother Britannicus had, after his adoption, greeted him as usual as Ahenobarbus, he tried to prove to Claudius that Britannicus was not his son at all. In addition, when his aunt Lepida was on trial, he was a witness against her, to please his mother, who was making every effort to have her found guilty.

He corrupted free-born boys and seduced married women; he even forced himself on the Vestal Virgin Rubria. He almost married the freedwoman Acte, after bribing some ex-consuls to swear on oath that she was of royal birth. He castrated the boy Sporus and actually tried to turn him into a woman; then Nero held a marriage ceremony in the usual way, with a dowry and a bridal veil, took him home, accompanied by a crowd of followers, and treated him as his wife. He took this Sporus, all dressed up like an empress and carried along in a litter, to the assemblies and markets of Greece; soon afterwards, he took him around the image-market in Rome, repeatedly kissing him. No one doubted that he wanted sexual relations with his own mother, and was prevented by her enemies, afraid that this ruthless and powerful woman would become too strong with this sort of special favour. What added to this opinion was that he included among his mistresses a certain prostitute who they said looked very much like Agrippina. They also said that, whenever he rode in a litter with his mother, the stains on his clothes afterwards proved that he had



indulged in incest with her. Claudius was the first member of Nero's family to be murdered; Nero may not have been the one to arrange it, but he certainly knew about it. He did not hide the fact because later he used to praise mushrooms (the poison was administered to Claudius in a dish of mushrooms), as "the food of the gods", in the words of the Greek proverb. In fact, after Claudius's death, he made fun of him with every insult he could accusing him of stupidity and cruelty; he used to joke that Claudius had stopped "being the idiot" among men, by lengthening the first syllable of the word, and he treated many of his decrees and acts as worthless as if they had been done by a crazy fool; as a final humiliation of Claudius, he neglected his tomb providing it with nothing except a low-walled enclosure. Nero tried to kill his half-brother Britannicus with poison; he saw him as a rival in singing, since his voice was pleasanter than his own, but an equal motive for the murder was the fear that he might at some point gain more influence and support because men remembered his father. He got the poison from a certain well-known poisoner, Locusta. When the poison worked more slowly than expected, since it only gave Britannicus a serious stomach-ache, he had the woman summoned and he beat her himself. He accused her of giving him a remedy instead of the poison. Her excuse was that she had given Britannicus less in order to keep the crime secret and save Nero from being suspected. Then in his own room, he forced her to cook up the fastest possible potion to take effect instantly. He tested it on a kid-goat, which took 5 hours to die; he had her cook it again so that it was stronger still, and he gave it to a pig. The pig dropped dead at once. He ordered the poison to be taken to the dining-room and to be given to Britannicus who dined with him that day. The boy fell dead the moment he tasted it, but Nero lied to his guests saying that he had been attacked by an illness, which he had suffered from for some time. The very next day Nero had Britannicus quickly buried in a simple funeral in the middle of a thunder storm. He gave Locusta a pardon and large estates as a reward for her good work. He also provided her with some pupils. To the murder of his mother, he added the killing of his aunt, Domitia. He visited her when she was ill with severe constipation. She was stroking his beard - he was already a grown-up - and by chance said kindly: "As soon as I receive this, I want to die." He turned to those next to him and said, apparently as a joke, that he would shave it off immediately. He ordered the doctors to give the ill woman a dose of medicine which was too big in order to empty her stomach. He took over her property before she was actually dead and cancelled her will, so that he lost nothing. There was no sort of family relations which he did not damage by one crime or another. He killed Antonia, daughter of Claudius, when she refused his offer of marriage after Poppaea's death, on the charge that she was organising a plot against him. Likewise, he dealt with all others in any way related to him by family or by marriage. He insisted that Rufrius Crispinus, still only a boy, his stepson and the child of Poppaea, was drowned in the sea by his own slaves while he was fishing because they said he pretended to be a general and played being an emperor. He banished his nurse's son Tuscus, because, during his governorship of Egypt, he had bathed in the bathhouse built for Nero's visit to the province. He forced his tutor Seneca to commit suicide. He sent poison to Burrus, the Praetorian Prefect, having promised to send medicine for his throat. He used poison, either in their food or their drinks, to get rid of the old, rich freedmen who supported his adoption and his accession, and given their guidance when he was emperor (Suetonius). Moreover, publicly blaming Christians and forcing them to be fed to animals, ignited while alive, or nailed to a crucifix was another misstep. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn apart by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car (Tacitus, *Annales*, book 15, chapter 44). Christians were not a popular group in Rome at that time. Yet, the treatment and torture of the religious group was so horrific that even the Romans who believed them to be responsible thought it extreme.

1.5. *Evidences on Poppaea*

Tacitus: Poppaea would reproach the emperor with incessant vituperation and sometimes call him in jest a mere ward who was under the rule of others, and was so far from having an empire that he had not even his liberty. "Why," she asked, "was her marriage put off? Was it, forsooth, her beauty and her ancestors, with their triumphal honours, that failed to please, or her being a mother, and her sincere heart? No; the fear was that as a wife at least she would divulge the wrongs of the Senate, and the wrath of the people at the arrogance and rapacity of his mother. If the only daughter-in-law Agrippina could bear was one who wished evil to her son, let her be restored to her union with Otho. She would go anywhere in the world, where she might hear of the insults heaped on the emperor, rather than witness them, and be also involved in his perils." Such and similar complaints, rendered impressive by tears and by the cunning of an adulteress, no one checked, as all longed to see the mother's power broken, while not a person believed that the son's hatred would steel his heart to her murder (Tacitus, *The Annals*, 14.1).

Next to records that are indicating Nero's guilt to murder, in particular those that were his close relatives, there are records of Nero's sweetness: "Wearing Augustus's sun-hat amongst our courtyard plants I sit and eat and drink with you, Poppaea. Together we grow old and fat." (Lehmann, 1981).

2. **The opera Coronation of Poppaea**

Poppaea and Nero were chosen to be protagonists of the Monteverdi/Bussonello's opera with the focus on love. Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643) was an Italian composer, choir-master and string player. He composed sacred and secular music, introduced novelties in the opera and is considered a crucial transitional figure between the Renaissance and Baroque periods of music history. Francesco Bussonello (1598–1659) from Venice was a lawyer by profession, and a renowned writer of librettos. The Coronation of Poppaea was first performed during the 1643 carnival season at the Teatro Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice, where Monteverdi was the choirmaster at the Basilica di San Marco. The Coronation of Poppaea was one of the first operas to use historic events and people. Eight years later (in 1651), the opera was put on stage in Naples, Italy, and was then revived after more than 200 years. The original manuscript of the score was not found; two surviving copies from the 1650s show significant differences between them. However, this can be expected as the scores had to be adjusted to the cast. How much of the music is actually Monteverdi's, and how much of others, is a matter of dispute. The score features 28 singing characters. The original Venetian production may have used role-doubling, allowing the opera to be staged with no more than 11 singers: two female sopranos, three male sopranos (castratos), two contraltos (castratos), two tenors and two basses.

2.1. *The story and the characters in the opera Coronation of Poppaea*

While the libretto is based on actual historic persons, there are artistic differences introduced by the writer: The prologue sets the philosophical question of the utmost importance: is it Fortune, Virtue or Love? From experience, one could guess that the answer to this question is that all three are a prerequisite, but not necessarily sufficient for success. Yet, the writer inclines in the story that Love is the most important one. The scope of the story is Poppaea's ambition to become empress. Both Nero and Otho love Poppaea. Poppaea responds to Nero as he can make her empress which Otho cannot. Poppaea and Nero become lovers at the outrage of Otho and Nero's wife Octavia who feels humiliated and betrayed – for herself and for what she represents as the daughter of the emperor and a part of the aristocracy. Seneca, the moral pillar, and those close to Octavia also feel offended. Octavia urges Seneca to stand against Nero's adultery. Seneca challenges Nero and their discourse ends by Nero forcing Seneca to suicide. Then Octavia bids Otho to murder Poppaea. Otho approaches Poppaea asleep in the garden, but Love prevents his deed. Having learned about the complot, Nero banishes Otho and Octavia from Rome and crowns Poppaea empress. Overwhelmed with success and happiness, Poppaea and Nero celebrate the victory of Love.

2.2. *Differences between the story and the evidences*

There is a difference in the scope with respect to reality; to our best knowledge, there are no historical facts of Poppaea's ambition to the crown. The above arguments given by Tacitus indicate that Poppaea was complaining about Nero being manipulated by Agrippina the Younger and that after she was forced out of marriage with Otho she did not wish to be Nero's mistress but expected that he would marry her. This is essentially different from having an ambition to the crown, as it points to the interest of Nero to be with Poppaea as the main driving element. Tacitus reports that Poppaea would rather be reunited with Otho than be Nero's mistress, pointing to Virtù instead of Fortune or Love. In the story, Poppaea and Nero love each other; the libretto presents beautiful poetic expressions of their devotion. It seems that in reality it would be probable for Nero to love Poppaea, but not so convincing that she loved him. The above historical evidences indicate that Nero was taking advantage of his power to get what he wished regardless of others' feelings. The evidence on the deeds and opinions of Poppaea is scarce. There are records from both Tacitus and Suetonius that it was likely that Nero killed Poppaea and Poppaea's unborn child and also Poppaea's child from the previous marriage. Therefore, it seems unlikely that she could love someone with such attitude which was evidently not instantaneous. Although some historians think that there were prejudices about Nero, there are not many positive facts that would prove his gentleness and kindness. In the story, Claudia Octavia complots a murder of Poppaea. Moreover, she forces Otho to perform the deed. In reality, there is evidence on such intentions or actions from Claudia Octavia. In the story, the ethical bias is on instrumental marriages which were made for political motifs on the account of human misery. Instead, it seems right that Poppaea and Nero, who were fortunate to find love, come together in marriage. Also, in the story, Octavia, in spite of her complot plan, stays alive due to the generosity of Nero and we are left thinking that the marriage between Poppaea and Nero is a happy one.

The idea to worship Love linked to someone for whom there is a reasonable doubt that he killed among others also his mother, brother, sister, mentor, and ultimately his love and unborn child seems so odd and bold that one may pose a question whether it was meant to be a parody. Deriving from the records on the carnival festivities in Venice, where Coronation of Poppaea was first performed:

"Audience members sometimes struggled to follow the plot or identify with the characters, which led to the introduction of comic scenes. These originated in the Italian semi-improvised form of the *commedia dell'arte* (comedy of professional artists) and provided some light relief. Comic characters who usually held a low social position were a means to appeal to a wider public who could better identify with them. Comic arias or duets appeared, an early example being Monteverdi's 1642 opera, *L'in-coronazione di Poppea* (The Coronation of Poppea), in which the main character, Damigella, shares a comic love duet with her page, Valletto" (Maynes, 2024).

3. Conclusion

By the changes introduced in the libretto of the Coronation of Poppaea, the story on love between Poppaea and Nero seems ethically rather sound. Besides focusing on Love, it is supported also by Fortune and Virtù. However, it essentially does not have much in common with what happened to the real persons who most likely lacked all three elements facing loveless relationships and premature death for political reasons and glory.

There are many lucid timeless observations found in the libretto such as:

"One might add that our prince robs everyone to line the pockets of a few. The innocent suffer while criminals are doing very nicely."

"To have dealings with princes is perilous. Love and hate counts nothing with them: their emotions are governed by pure self-interest."

"Oh, unhappy female sex. Born free by nature and the will of heaven marriage chains us up in slavery."



Funding: Slovenian Research Agency ARIS through the core fundings J3-60063, J2-4447, P3-0388 and ARIS/University of Ljubljana project Nanostructurome.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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