

## Ghostwriting the Emperor Nero: O’Gorman’s Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus

Ellen O’Gorman’s chapter “Vox Principis” in *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus* examines Tacitus’ accounts of Seneca, Lucan, and Petronius vying for the soul—so to speak—of Nero. O’Gorman presents the three authors as competing ghostwriters for the emperor through Tacitus’ *Annals*.

The first author she mentions is Lucius Annaeus Seneca. Seneca was Nero’s teacher as a young boy and is described by Tacitus as “[one of the] guides of Nero’s youth” (13.2.1). But perhaps where Seneca first becomes prominent is when Nero delivers the oration of Claudius. The speech, having been written by Seneca, Tacitus writes, “[the oration] ...displayed much culture, as that man had a talent which was pleasant and adapted to the ears of the modern audience” (13.3.1). This and future writings leave Nero without a voice, instead speaking as Seneca. A similar problem occurs in Nero’s explanation and accusations concerning his mother’s death in which Seneca unknowingly incriminates himself. This comes to a head, however, when a rhetorical confrontation ensues between Nero and Seneca in the fourteenth book of the *Annals*. While largely believed that Nero was the victor of the debate, his style was unmistakably Senecan, whom Tacitus claims Nero owes everything in regards to his education.

His death, according to Tacitus, is described as such: “He was then carried into a bath, with the steam of which he was suffocated, and he was burnt without any of the usual funeral rites. So he had directed in a codicil of his will, even when in the height of his wealth and power he was thinking of life’s close.” Even in death, Seneca was the model of stoicism, an attractive philosophy in the age of Nero.

Following Seneca is another writer first mentioned by Tacitus in the Pisonian Conspiracy. This is the poet Lucan. It is argued that “Nero’s Assimilation to Lucan can also be seen to empty the princeps of meaning at the moment of his suppression of the poet.” The argument goes something like this: Nero wanted to be like Lucan, and effectively to replace him; to do this he suppresses Lucan’s voice; however, because of his attempts to imitate Lucan, by silencing him Nero brings about his own undoing. In his death, Tacitus recounts Lucan’s last words, which were from a verse that Lucan himself wrote. In doing so, Lucan has one last reassertion of his poetic control over Nero and his last words reaffirm his superior literary intellect over Nero. The act of defying the emperor, in the poets’ last moments, is adopted by the third author: Petronius.

Petronius was Nero’s biggest supporter when it came to his more lascivious proclivities; however, he eventually lost favor to Tigellinus. Having been ordered to be put to death, Petronius did not wait, but instead took his own life. Tacitus describes his death as a parody, especially of Seneca’s stoicism. He quoted his own crude poetry and bandaged and rebandaged his wrists.

In all three accounts of the deaths of the poets, Tacitus places exceptional emphasis on the victory of the poetic supremacy over that of the emperor. While what Tacitus would have said of Nero’s death is unknown, O’Gorman suggests that the account would include Nero’s “weakness and indecision at the point of suicide” that is so indicative of his literary incompetence especially compared to Seneca, Lucan, and Petronius.