

Prae-Tacitism and Anti-Tacitism: Gerolamo Cardano's Encomium Neronis

In this paper I propose a specific reading of Cardano's intriguing *Encomium Neronis*, "Praise of Nero" which was first published in 1562 and appeared also as part of the *Opera omnia* (1640). The enigmatic work has been regarded, *inter alia*, as a highly autobiographical (Nikolaus Eberl 1994; Alexander Roose 2011, 'une autobiographie'), and a deeply serious text (Marc van der Poel, Leon ter Beek, 'bittere ernst'; Angelo Paratico who entitled his English translation of 2012 with '*Nero, an Exemplary Life*'), as the *summa* of the author's universal historical knowledge (Gabriel Naudé, 1640), as a political statement in *sua re* after the author's son had been sentenced to death (Eberl), as a manifesto of Cardano's political convictions, as an 'utopian' vision (Roose), or just as a rhetorical exercise. I think that the *Encomium Neronis* requires a different interpretation, and that the appropriation of Tacitus, in the middle of the 16th century, is pivotal for its understanding. There can be no doubt that Cardano was well aware of the genre of the mock encomium and its literary techniques and means: in his *Praise of Nero*, he applies them in an artful and very original way. The work excels in intellectual humour, especially in its mock arguments regarding historical theory, historical truth, and its challenging persiflages of historical judgements. In my paper I will show that Cardano is targeting the Tacitean manner of writing history, with its typical elements (i.a., "detection" of all kinds of political simulation or dissimulation, the uncovering of the *arcana imperii*, the "innuendo" style, psychological motivation, creation of curious evidence, *indignatio* speech), and the quickly increasing impact of Tacitus in the middle of the 16th century on historical writing and thinking. On the one hand, Cardano imitates some fascinating – and seemingly persuasive – aspects of Tacitus's manner of writing of history, on the other hand, he criticizes and mocks Tacitus's method of arguing and creating "evidence". In this way, Cardano construes a spectacular and unsettling *demonstratio* of a paradox: while Tacitus is the main source of the negative image of Nero as the worst of all emperors, Cardano's application of Tacitus's historical method leads to the opposite result, to the assessment of Nero as the best emperor. Cardano's *Encomium Neronis* is certainly not just an empty rhetorical exercise; but neither is it 'deeply serious', 'highly autobiographical', 'utopian' or a manifesto of the author's political convictions. It is a masterpiece of the *genus ioco-serium*, in which Cardano offers an intriguing case of appropriation, namely via persiflage, and of criticism at the same time. Through applying the Horatian *adagium* 'ridentem dicere verum' Cardano entertains and challenges his readers, potential Tacitists, at a moment in time when Tacitism was not yet a fully developed intellectual phenomenon. Cardano's demonstration is highly dynamic: it does not accept any status quo, and it escapes all kinds of traditional categories, i.a. "red" and "black" Tacitism.