Interaction Between Political And Social Life In Ancient Imperial Rome Essay, Research Paper

The interaction between political and social life in Ancient Rome has been accurately portrayed in the well researched novel, “The Course of Honour”, by Lindsey Davies. However as this is a fictional novel told as an interesting story instead of fact, the information given must be corroborated with several primary sources to correct any inherent biases.

Lindsey Davies is an author who specialises in writing about life in Ancient Rome. Her novels are famous for the detective work of Marcus Didius Falco, with books such as “Last Act in Palmyra”, “Venus in Copper”, “A Dying Light in Corduba” and “The Iron Hands of Mars” winning her the Sherlock Holmes Award for the best comic detective. Born in Birmingham, she completed an English degree at Oxford University and now resides in Greenwich, England. Since most of her books are in fact detective stories, caution must be taken with biases being made to suit the story she is trying to tell, with many fact-based detective writers such as Davies herself known to stretch the truth to make the story much more exciting for the reader. This will be taken into account when analysing the historical accuracy of “The Course of Honour”.

“The Course of Honour” is a book which stretches over five decades in Ancient Imperial Rome, from the reign of Tiberius in AD 31 to the eventual and successful reign of Vespasian. The book follows the political struggle faced by Vespasian, a Senator, to climb the ranks and eventually become the Emperor who “brought peace to Rome after years of strife”, according to Davies. (Davies, book review) This is backed up by other sources which praises Vespasian as being-

“….strong enough to restore orderly government and to beat back the warring troops to their proper quarters.” (M.Cary & TJ Haarhoff, p. 83)

“But when Vespasian, in the course of his general triumph, restored stable government to Britain…” (Tacitus, p.68)

As well as being a strong source of information about political life during this time, the novel also catalogues the struggles faced before and after marriage by Vespasians mistress, the freedwoman Caenis. Their forbidden relationship is threatened as Vespasian reaches the height of his political career. Caenis was but a footnote mentioned in history which Davies has sanctified into a wonder woman without whom Vespasians career could not have possibly succeeded. This obvious glorification of a story is an example of a bias used to make a tale more interesting, and the lack of historical sources commenting on Caenis only proves that she is nowhere near as important as Davis makes her out to be. Regardless, this novel achieves its aim as an interesting secondary source of information on Imperial Rome from two totally different perspectives- that of a slave and freedwoman, and that of an emperor. It showcases very suitably both the social and political struggles which are faced in upkeeping this unlikely relationship.

There are different viewpoints on the way slaves were treated in Imperial Rome. Caenis in the story is first portrayed as a faithful and respectful slave, claiming “I know how to keep my mouth shut, any sensible slave does!” (Davies, p.17) This restricted form of life is backed up by this quote by a primary source on slavery-

“Its’ a dogs life for you, chained to the wall. You’re entitled to something better. Good-bye to the endless bread and water of solitude.” (Ovid, The Erotic Poems, p92-93)

When Caenis is initially courted by Vespasian while she is still a slave and he asks her to go to bed with her, she replies “I cannot afford the risk. I told you; I told you right from the start – I am the property of my mistress, and her approval matters to me.” (Davis, p.46)

The accuracy of the fact that slaves were not even allowed to have lovers is backed up again by Ovid in the following phrase:

“You stuck to it. Duty is duty, no lovers admitted.” (Ovid, The Erotic Poems, p94)

The book progresses further with Vespasian marrying a suitable wife, since he is not legally allowed to marry Caenis. He embarks on his political career and Imperial Rome sees a flurry of Emperors leading up to the time known as “The Year of the Four Emperors”. All of these events are seen through Caenis’ eyes who provides many wonderful insights to the erratic lives of emperors, including the crazy and murderous antics of the emperor Gaius Caligula, as follows:

“Caligula had changed fully into the monster that had been merely foreshadowed before. He was ready to test his power to the limit- and there was no limit. He killed his rival, Gemellus. He declared himself a living god. There was a rumour that Caligula intended to award Incitatus, his horse, a consulship.” (Davis, p142)

The antics of Gaius Caligula according to Davis have been backed up by the following quote -

“he revealed the havoc an irresponsible ruler might create” (Syme, p439)

“Gaius the Emperor was replaced by Gaius the Monster. He made some of the highest officials run for miles beside his chariot, dressed in their gowns, or wait in short linen tunics at the head or foot of his dining couch” (ibid, 26)

Gaius Caligula was a keen supporter of games and entertainment in Ancient Rome, spending all of the treasury money on expensive gladiatorial displays and wild beast hunts. “The Course of Honour” also provides an insight into the leisure time of Ancient Romans, again showing the accurate interaction between the social life and political life of the times in the quote, “The art of the tragic pantomime had developed nearly to its’ peak. The mood of the story was conveyed by an orchestra of wind and percussion.” (Davis p.42) The following primary source clarifies this quote by saying:

“Ballet was the highly popular, sophisticated dances of the Pantomimi, who danced traditional themes in dumb-show, with music and chorus, beloved by the Roman Republic.” (Tacitus p.402)

After Caligulas assassination, the following excerpt from “The Course of Honour” shows the strange way in which the Romans carried out their politics-

“The Senate briefly fancied that the Republic might be restored, though

individual members were acutely aware that would threaten their personal power. But then an odd accident intervened. Some soldiers, cheerily looting the Palace, found the last remaining adult male of the imperial family hiding behind a curtain and for a joke proclaimed him Emperor. The poor soul they seized on was Claudius” (Davis, p.147)

Again, the historical significance of “The Course of Honour” has been verified by the following primary source:

“Gaius left no obvious successor, and the Senate seriously debated a restoration of the Republic. But the praetorian guards had found in the palace the middle-aged uncle of Gaius, the eccentric Claudius, and soon decided that he was not too eccentric for them. Claudius was slow and pedantic, a slightly ridiculous character, but nevertheless able and conscientious” (Tacitus p. 37)

“The Course of Honour” not only details Claudius and his personal traits, but Claudius’ ex wife and mother of Nero, Agrippina, who is singled out as being devious, single minded and prepared to go to any lengths to ensure her sons procession to the throne, as is stated in these quotes:

“She was Caligula’s sister, one of the famous three- the underhand, dangerous, dark-horse candidate. (Davis, p.191)

“Eventually Nero’s irritation at her cloying mother-love and her dominating ambition reached the point where in the grand Claudian tradition he determined to be rid of her” (Davis, p.267)

These “underhand” traits are found to be true by cross-referencing with Tacitus:

“It was her ambition that this boy, the future Nero, should be wedded to the emperors daughter Octavia. Here criminal methods were necessary” (Tacitus, p.253)

“Agrippina was a relentless enemy” (Tacitus, p.261)

Continuing on through the generations of Ancient Rome, the book climaxes at the point where Nero poisons Brittanicus’ wine to secure his own right to the throne, taking on his mother Agrippina’s murderous tactics. The fact that Lindsey Davis has concentrated more on the murderous and underhand tactics that both Agrippina and her son Nero have used to get their own way, rather than concentrate on the good they contributed to Rome is another indication of bias. Rather than being a directly written bias, she has used this bias more deceptively as a fictional writer, choosing to leave in all of these scandalous moments in Roman history to make “The Course of Honour” a dynamic book full of treachery and deceit, displayed in the following quote:

“(Brittanicus) stopped breathing. He fell…. Nero said- and announced it perfectly coolly- made the claim without a stammer- uttered it without a blush- that Brittanicus was epileptic, he had been epileptic all his life, and he would soon recover his senses and his sight.” (Davis, p.217)

This has been backed up by the following primary source:

“Nero still lay back unconcerned, and remarked that this often happened to epileptics, that Brittanicus had been one since infancy and soon his sight and consciousness would return” (Tacitus p.291)

However, a good side to Nero which has definitely not been showcased in “The Course of Honour” is the following quote from Nero himself:

“I bring with me no feud, no resentment or vindictiveness. From my house, bribery and favouritism will be excluded. I will keep personal and state affairs separate” (Tacitus p.286)

By the time Vespasian comes to be emperor in “The Course of Honour”, Rome seems to have gone through terrible strife, and as we near the end of the book Vespasian comes to the throne and all of Rome’s problems seem to be over. Meanwhile, Caenis is having a hard time living by herself and is somewhat sympathised by Davis, which is another form of bias. After Vespasians wife dies, he returns back to Caenis, as is detailed in the following account by Davis:

“Sometimes the most major events take place so quietly. Caenis was to live with Vespasian: it was as simple as that.” (Davis p.263)

The following primary source backs this up:

“(Vespasian) took up again with Caenis, his former mistress and one of Antonia’s freedwomen and secretaries, who remained his wife in all but name even when he became Emperor”.

The question which needs to be asked is whether Davis has felt sympathetic towards Caenis as a woman who waited around for a man her whole life and simply created the story around her. She is glorified into someone who was “the woman who exerted the greatest influence on the future Emperor.” (www.photo.stockton.edu/roman/all-records.cfm) when she is not present in most primary sources, and only given a brief notice in a secondary source, as follows:

“Caenis, who had been a freedwoman of Antonia, she too died before Vespasian did.” (www.britannica.com)

“The Course of Honour” finishes with a happy ending, where Caenis’ own slave proclaims Vespasian as:

“Titus Flavius Vespasianus, Conqueror of Britan and Hero of Judaea; Vespasianus Caesar Augustus – Consul, Chief Priest, father of his country and Emperor of Rome!” (Davis p.331)

Vespasian was a much-loved leader during his reign, although this isn’t too obvious in the book because the goings-on of Rome are seen through Caenis’ own eyes which are more focused on Vespasians personal characteristics rather than what he had achieved politically. However, a satisfying quote by Josephus which sums up the Romans adoration of Vespasian follows:

“Neither Senate nor people will put up with a filthy lout like Vitellius instead of a clean-living man like Vespasian, or turn down a kindly leader in favour of a despotic brute, or choose a childless man as their chief rather than a father, for the best guarantee of peace is the outstanding excellence of princes.” (Josephus, p.281)

Throughout her book “The Course of Honour”, Lindsey Davies has provided a very accurate account of Ancient Rome through the eye of a freedwoman, which details life as it was for the people of lower classes. At the same time her book provides an unsurpassed and easy-to-read account of the political life of the many emperors that were to reign up to Vespasians imperial court.

“The Course of Honour” contains only a small amount of bias. Mainly this is information left out of the book to make it either more interesting, exciting, or to make a particular character seem really vicious or god like – for example, Nero. Caenis is portrayed as an essential part to Vespasians life, when it is said nowhere through the book that Vespasian appreciated, understood or really even returned her undying love. However, it is only foreseeable that Davis, as a woman herself, could feel sympathetic to this kind of pathetic life lived by a woman back in the Ancient Roman age.

Seen through the eyes of a freedwoman, “The Course of Honour” is not just a story set in the time of Imperial Rome- it is a story based on fact. While there are limitations on primary sources to evaluate and fully cross-reference this material, it is obvious that Davis has researched her material well. “The Course of Honour” achieves its aim of being a reliable, valid and accurate representation of both social and political life in Ancient Rome, as well as being worthwhile reading material.

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