Whither Quo Vadis?
Sienkiewicz's Novel in Film and Television
Whither *Quo Vadis*?

*Ruth Scodel and Anja Bettenworth*
Alors qu’on le préparait à sa première communion,
Mme de Coantré avait donné à son petit fils
l’édition pour la jeunesse de Quo vadis,
et depuis cet temps Alban était Romain.
Il avait sauté les pages consacrées à l’apôtre Pierre.

H. de Montherlant, Les Bestiaires
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This is a study of five adaptations – four feature films, and a TV miniseries – of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel *Quo Vadis?*, first serialized in Polish newspapers in 1895. The first of the films under discussion, Guazzoni’s, appeared in 1912, and is sometimes said to have been the first feature film produced. Its importance in demonstrating the powerful effects epic cinema could achieve is fully recognized in the scholarship and among film critics and fans. For example, a recent article in the Sunday *New York Times*, defending summer movies, says:

film spectacle works more or less the same now as it did in 1912 when the Italian epic “Quo Vadis” hit screens with a cast of literally thousands and extreme action in the form of a chariot race. That film’s pageantry, its gladiators and sacrificed Christians earned an enthusiastic thumbs-up from the sculptor Auguste Rodin, who declared it “a masterpiece.”

The last, the most expensive Polish film ever produced, appeared in 2001. We are thus looking at a series of versions of this story from a period that roughly encompasses the twentieth century.

*Quo Vadis?* is a historical novel, set in the reign of Nero. Most of its action takes place in the years 62–64 CE, though the final chapters and epilogue continue the story until Nero’s death in 68 CE. At its center is the love story of two entirely fictional characters, the Roman noble Marcus Vinicius and the Christian hostage Lygia Callina. These fictional characters, however, are embedded in a milieu populated by historical figures. Much of the action takes place at the court of Nero and features characters relatively well known from Roman historians: Nero himself, his second wife Poppaea Sabina, and the praetorian prefect (that is, the commander of the only military force in the city of Rome) Tigellinus. Many other characters are historical figures about whom much less is known. The historians inform...
us about the career of the general Aulus Plautius, for example, whom Sienkiewicz makes Lygia’s foster father, but not about his personality. Thematically opposed to Nero’s court in the novel are the Christians. Here also Peter and Paul, historically attested in Paul’s letters and in the Acts of the Apostles, mix with a variety of invented lesser characters. The novel also incorporates the legend of Peter’s vision of Christ and martyrdom in Rome first attested in the second century CE.  

Although textbooks and anthologies on adaptation in film have recently appeared at a rapid clip, the topic continues to be theoretically vexed. It is not difficult to see why. From the beginnings of cinema, novels of high cultural value have been an important source for films claiming high cultural status. This quest to borrow prestige has led to difficulties on both sides of the novel/film divide. Inevitably, it prompts popular and journalistic attention to “fidelity” so that critics judge a film not on its own terms but on how well it has transferred to the new medium, whatever the critic values in the original text or, all too often, on how much of the original it has transferred. This approach has also affected academic studies of the relationship between film and literary text where it had the advantage of being methodologically straightforward and congenial for scholars whose training was literary. Yet it often became a defense of literary territory, of the high art of literature against the popular medium of film. Even when there was no such agenda, in presenting the novel as primary and the film as secondary, it could make film seem derivative, not quite adequate. Furthermore, film adaptation requires that content be separated from form and this is exactly what literary scholarship (especially in New Criticism) has above all denied is possible. So, not surprisingly, a significant line of study in film has denied that adaptation is really possible. The leaders of the French New Wave, who were both critics and directors, argued that film is an entirely different medium from verbal narrative. This argument is closely linked to auteur theory in which the author of a film must work fully in the medium of film, using the camera to achieve his effects rather than voice-over, for example. This approach can exaggerate the differences between the media and reduce cinema to image (ignoring dialogue, intertitles, and music), while denying language the ability to produce precise images. A film can borrow the story or characters of a novel, but these are not the “organic novel.” This approach also promotes the familiar claim that a great novel cannot become a great film because it is already at its best in language and translation into a different medium can only detract from it.
Of course, narrators and cameras can do different things. A writer must usually pause the action to describe scenes or characters, and must decide whether it is important what things look like; a camera does not need to pause for this purpose (although, of course, it can, and the establishing shot is familiar) but it also cannot avoid making everything look a particular way. While film and novel can sometimes perform each others’ tricks, different things are easy and hard for each. Sarah Caudwell’s amusing series of detective novels (Thus Was Adonis Murdered and its sequels) uses a first-person narrative whose sex is never identified; it would be very hard to do this unobtrusively in a movie.

Amid all this theoretical dismay, novels continue to be made into films and viewers continue to discuss their “fidelity” to the source – the practice is inevitable. Comparing film and novel can be helpful but the debate has shown how much caution is required. Films can use novels in a variety of ways and none is inherently better than another. Deconstruction has taught us not to assume that originals are better than copies. Paradigms such as “translation,” “reading,” or “imitation” (in a neo-Aristotelian sense, not as copying, but as creative reworking) are not perfect, but they can work: a good adaptation takes some aspects of a literary text and uses them in the process of creating a new, independent work. Films often use more than plot elements; even as they compress, change, add, and distort plot material, they may powerfully convey atmosphere, affect, and social commentary.

One recent essay by a leading theorist proposes a model of “dialogism” and points to the ability of film adaptations to “take an activist stance toward their source novels, inserting them into a much broader intertextual dialogism.” Indeed, many readers of novels who love the movies have had the experience of recognizing a new possible understanding of a novel because a film made it more salient, or of realizing for the first time what value they placed on some moment in a novel because a film omitted it.

Historical novels present certain issues that make “fidelity” an especially interesting, because complex, category. While scholars have examined how films treat history, they have not given much close attention to the particular issues raised by historical novels. The historical novel is itself an adaptation of historical sources. So the issue arises not just of the novelist’s fidelity but also of the novelist’s judgment in the use of sources: insofar as a historical novelist takes on the role of a historian, the novelist can legitimately be judged as one. The novelist selects from the historical
material available to him or her, and we expect a historian not to be blindly faithful to sources, but to be careful and critical. In Sienkiewicz’s case, we can easily identify most of the acknowledged sources: Tacitus and Suetonius for the events of Nero’s reign; Juvenal, Martial, and Petronius for Roman life of the early Imperial period; inspection of Roman monuments and art. An important secondary source was Renan’s *The Antichrist*. But we then have yet a further problem of fidelity, since the sources themselves are artful literary narratives and politically motivated. They are not true primary sources and are not even contemporary with Nero (Tacitus is the earliest, and he was a child during Nero’s reign); they depend on earlier histories. The sources of Tacitus and Suetonius were compositions of the elite senatorial class, which loathed Nero, a loathing Tacitus and Suetonius share and transmit. Sienkiewicz is generally faithful to Tacitus but he is not critical. He ignores Tacitus’ loathing for the Christians (*Ann. 15.44*) and gives his Christians no characteristics that could explain Tacitus’ belief that Christians hated the human race; but his mistrust of Tacitus’ judgment on them does not lead him to mistrust him elsewhere. And he does distort his sources. The evidence suggests that Nero was not untalented as a poet and performer; Sienkiewicz makes him appallingly bad, and Peter Ustinov took lessons in singing badly to prepare for the role.

So before we even consider one of the *Quo Vadis* films, we face a whole chain of mediators between the past and the novelistic text: the lost authors used by Tacitus and Suetonius; Tacitus and Suetonius themselves; the modern historians. There were other significant influences on Sienkiewicz’s vision of ancient Rome, such as earlier historical novels (he was much influenced by *Ben-Hur*) and historical paintings; and Sienkiewicz’s own filtering concerns. Yet the historical novel, as a genre, implicitly makes claims that are remarkably similar to those of Hollywood film. Although its access to information about the past is mediated, in Sienkiewicz’s case by several stages, the historical novel promises its readers that the author’s imagination and narrative skill compensate for the distance of the past and permit immediate access. The historical novel offers the possibility of vicariously experiencing life in the past.

So the historicity of historical novels matters. We could even try to establish membership in the genre, strictly defined, by trying to imagine an updated adaptation. The plot of Sienkiewicz’s novel could not happen in another historical period and, if anyone could transfer the outlines of the story to a different setting, it is hard to see what value they could add.
Novel and Film

The same is surely true of Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* novels – the setting is a central source, perhaps the most important source, of narrative engagement. So from this point of view, the historical novel is one intervention in the ongoing process of interpreting and adapting the past, an intervention that can influence how that process continues but cannot entirely control even revisions of itself.

Historical film carries the “reality effect” of the historical novel further. Cinematic epics once advertised “See!” and “You are there!” (the latter was the title of a television series about historical events that ran from 1953–7). Early screenings sometimes provoked spontaneous reactions from spectators (an extreme case is the Argentinian spectator who shot at Judas in a screening of *The Life of Christ*).\(^{16}\) This ability to make the past seem present gives both the historical novel and the historical film a special function as works of history. Indeed, postmodern historians have explored the value of dramatic film as history. Even though characters and plot may be invented, film’s vividness can make the actual “pastness” of the past real, bring out the contingency of historical events and rescue them from apparent inevitability. As Rosenstone’s discussion of Holocaust films reveals, the experience of the best films offers a form of genuine historical insight.\(^{17}\) Film cannot do everything historical writing can do; it is poorly suited to the analysis of long-term developments or distant causes. (The novel can engage directly in historical discussion, as, for example, *War and Peace* does; but *Quo Vadis?* does not). Yet by juxtaposing large-scale spectacle with medium shots and close-ups of individuals, film can convey the entanglement of individuals in historical events with unique power. Both feature films and novels, despite their fictional plots, can present thoughtful interpretations of the past.\(^{18}\)

Both historical novel and film, if successful, preserve past views of the past longer and more powerfully than conventional history. The relationships among successful historical novels, their films, and changing views of the past are variable. *Gone with the Wind* is still read, sequels appear, and the film is firmly placed in the Hollywood canon, but its historical assumptions about slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction are a painful embarrassment. That the holders of the novel’s copyright sued to stop publication of a novel by Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone*, that re-imagines the story from a slave’s perspective, shows the anxiety that surrounds these issues.\(^{19}\) This suit was surely not inspired by a fear that the novels could be confused but by an awareness of the vulnerability of *Gone with the Wind* to historical
criticism. There is unlikely to be a remake of the film *Gone with the Wind*. Because the historical issues are so important, the canonical standing of the film does not guarantee that those who see it will accept its view of American history.

In contrast, however historians may rethink Roman history, Rome does not have the immediate political relevance that the Civil War still has in the United States or the Nazi period has in Germany. Nero was already a figure for decadence and corruption before Sienkiewicz. The 1925 film offered Emil Jannings as an extravagantly wicked Nero who is an object of horrified fascination (see Plate 1.1, for example) and Charles Laughton varied the same theme in Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Sign of the Cross* in 1937. The 1951 *Quo Vadis* was originally conceived as MGM’s attempt to outdo *The Sign of the Cross*, although the film was not finally made until much later. In this film, Peter Ustinov’s famous Nero develops what Jannings and Laughton had already done. Although different

Plate 1.1  Nero attempts to rape Lygia. Source: 1925. Producer: Arturo Ambrosio, Unione cinematografica Italiana; Eastman House
versions will configure Nero’s evil differently, the differences are likely to remain within limits because the movies have taught audiences what Nero should be and there is no powerful motive for any historical revision to influence popular culture. The stakes are not very high. So the historical assumptions of *Quo Vadis?* can continue to influence popular perceptions of the period.

Similarly, Robert Graves’s *I, Claudius* offered a story of the principate as a melodrama of the Julio–Claudian family and the BBC television adaptation of 1976 helped establish the family romance as a popular way of understanding Roman history. So *Gladiator* (2000) defines its hero and villain by their happy and miserable families and HBO’s *Rome* (2005) manages to provide sexual or familial motives for almost every important event of the late Republic and early Augustan period. *Quo Vadis?* itself has continued to function as a model for other representations of the Roman world, as if it were a historical source. Its most unfortunate effect is an inescapable function of its plot. It would be almost impossible to configure the story so that it would not understand the persecution of the Christians as the most important event of Nero’s reign, or so that the decadence it sees in Rome does not explain the success of Christianity. Even though the novel and most of the films show Nero’s persecution of the Christians as the outcome of a series of events, each of which could have happened otherwise, the novel, and the films, finally deny contingency to the rise of Christianity and do not fulfill this special potential of the cinematic treatment of the past. Lygia, Vinicius, and Petronius could have had very different lives but contingency is limited to detail. Novel and films give the impression that Roman culture and Christianity were such that events like these were inevitable. Authorial, authoritative comments, such as the epilogue in the novel, or the final image of Christ in the 1912 film and opening voice-over in that of 1951, contribute to this impression. Since a Christian audience believes that a divine plan lies behind the success of Christianity, historical possibility is severely limited.

Viewers of the *Quo Vadis* films are unlikely to have been aware how isolated Nero’s persecution was, how long it was before Christianity became dominant in the empire, or how long the empire was to last after Nero. The tradition to which the novel and the films belong makes the decadence represented by Nero’s court the cause of both Roman failure and Christianity’s triumph. The audience, therefore, is not likely to resist the invitation to see the story’s historical outline as inevitable.
The reputation of *Quo Vadis?* has declined, probably at least in part because its great appeal lay precisely in its ability to evoke ancient Rome and cinema has taken away that function. When it was first translated into all the major European languages at the end of the nineteenth century, it was both a runaway bestseller and a serious claimant for literary status.\textsuperscript{24} Although not all the reviews were favorable, there could be no doubt of its standing. Its author received the Nobel Prize in 1905. When Guazzoni chose it for filming in 1912, it united popularity with prestige. However, the novel, though still in print in many languages, is no longer as prestigious a text or as familiar as it was early in the twentieth century. It is distinctly old-fashioned; it is odd to consider that it is a near-contemporary of *What Maisie Knew*. Sienkiewicz has not had recent champions in the academy, and *Quo Vadis?* is no longer a standard on lists of recommended summer reading for students. The novel’s uplifting Christian message has helped guarantee its survival – it is still a favorite of conservative Christians, both Catholic and Protestant – but has not won it favor in universities.\textsuperscript{25} That there have been children’s editions in various languages and other abridged versions has probably not helped its reputation.\textsuperscript{26} It has, to a considerable extent, been replaced by its own film adaptations, particularly by the 1951 version. Vividly presenting long-ago and far-away places is a task for which film is peculiarly well suited.

My own experience [Scodel] is perhaps revealing. I have been a voracious reader of novels my entire life; I first read *Quo Vadis?* as an undergraduate at Berkeley. My best friend was enrolled in a survey class on Polish literature taught by a poet named Czesław Miłosz. One day, when the first quarter was almost over, he commented that they might be puzzled that they had read no fiction at all and explained: “If we read novels, we have to read Sienkiewicz – and I hate Sienkiewicz.”\textsuperscript{27} Curiosity about what the professor hated so much – he referred particularly to *Quo Vadis?* – led to a cursory read, especially since I was studying classics. My reading was cursory because I was bored and found the Christian message irritating. Sienkiewicz is no longer the outstanding representative of Polish literature for educated readers who do not know Polish. Miłosz himself won the Nobel Prize in 1980, and Wisława Szymborska in 1996. Sienkiewicz, though still part of the Polish canon (hence Miłosz’s vehemence), elsewhere has slipped into a grey territory between literary and popular fiction. This ambiguous status is liberating for the student of the films since they adapt
the novel as a high literary text, but the critic feels no particular reverence for the source.

Visual “fidelity” is especially complex. Like the novelist, the makers of film have seen historical paintings and they have seen other movies, too. The 1912 version famously borrows the image of a gladiator from Gérôme’s *Police Verso* of 1872. Whether or not Sienkiewicz ever saw this painting, whenever a moment in the film resembles a painting of the past from the lifetime of the author, the adaptation of the painting is a gesture of fidelity. Whatever the original intention behind the use of the image, it now successfully presents itself as a late nineteenth-century view of the Roman past. Similarly, the Kawalerowicz version of *2001* shows the influence of both Henryk Siemiradzki (in particular, his “Christian Dirce”) and Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Whatever contemporary classicists and archaeologists may think of Alma-Tadema’s idealized paintings of the ancient world, he is in period for Sienkiewicz, and Siemiradzki and Sienkiewicz were friends. The film thereby conveys a view of Neronian Rome as Sienkiewicz would have imagined it. This is faithfulness to the novel as a product of its own time. The 1951 *Quo Vadis* transforms Vinicius’ frantic ride back to the burning city of Rome into a chariot race. The way he rids himself of a pursuer is modeled on the famous chariot race in *Ben-Hur* which had been made into a film in 1925. Even the action-packed plot of *Quo Vadis* cannot escape its spectacular predecessor, just as Sienkiewicz had been influenced by *Ben-Hur*. On the other hand, composer Miklós Rózsa, who wrote the musical score for the 1951 film, made a serious attempt at reconstructing Roman music. Sienkiewicz’s Nero performs and his Christian martyrs sing but this music took no material form. In a talkie, if someone sings, there must actually be singing. The film’s music is surely much closer to what one might have heard in antiquity than whatever Sienkiewicz would have imagined; it is fidelity of a different order.

The overall look of the 1985 RAI version would be hard to imagine without Fellini’s *Satyricon* and this visual echoing functions as an authenticating gesture in a way that further demonstrates the complexity of fidelity in film. Fellini very freely adapted the novel by Petronius, the *Satyricon*, and he freely borrowed from other works of Roman literature also. The famous tagline of the film celebrates its freedom from conventional fidelity: “Rome. Before Christ. After Fellini.” (The novel actually takes place after the life of Christ, but Christianity is not yet influential in its world, so the tagline is meaningful.) Yet this film offers a model
for a “Petronian” vision that is fully cinematic, available and familiar in its very orientalism. The grotesque images permit the TV series to substitute exotic sights for the grandiose spectacles that the small screen and its budget do not accommodate (for example, the street scene in Plate 1.2). This emphasis on the street life of Rome and the bizarre appearance of the court of Nero is also grounded in Sienkiewicz who, like Fellini, was influenced by Juvenal’s depiction of Rome as mobbed with foreigners, hyperactive, noisy, and by Petronius’ pictures of unrestrained vulgarity. Since Petronius is at the center of Quo Vadis?, and frequently serves as focalizer or as an internal narrator, the echoes of Fellini function as echoes of Petronius.

The 1985 RAI version, which as a TV miniseries had far more time to fill and less ability to use impressive spectacle than a feature film, expands the novel’s plot systematically by mining the history of the Neronian
period. Its screenplay is based not just on Sienkiewicz but on his sources, particularly Tacitus, so that it incorporates Sienkiewicz’s story within a larger story about the Pisonian conspiracy. It also includes the murder of Pedanius Secundus, an investigation into his death, and the controversy over the execution of his slaves. Much of this new material is invented, mostly by imagining how events known only in outline might have happened; but the miniseries also has the conspirators actually attack Nero, which they never did. And time must be compressed so that Pedanius’ murder and the executions, events of 61, take place shortly before the fire and persecution of 64. Nonetheless, the miniseries fundamentally rejects the novel’s particular selection of events and re-inserts its fictions into a broader historical context. In the novel, there is no meaningful opposition to Nero and the only political struggle is between Petronius and Tigellinus. In the miniseries, more historical information produces a more complex political world. Infidelity to the novel is fidelity to history.

Historical fidelity is also at issue in an area that is more significant and much riskier. The novel and its adaptations deal not only with Nero and his court, where small differences from what the audience expects are unlikely to provoke controversy (while the inertia of tradition opposes major ones). They also depict early Christianity and the apostles Peter and Paul. Here the stakes could hardly be higher. The novel’s Catholicism was controversial from its first publication. Some critics found its pagans too attractive, its approval of erotic love excessive. Yet, as we will show in detail below, where the novel is profoundly unfaithful to its sources, it idealizes early Christianity, since it suppresses the evidence for disagreements between Peter and Paul found in the New Testament itself. No film attempts a substantially revisionist account of early Christianity, and it is hardly to be expected that any would. The 1985 version comes closest, expanding the novel by using other sources to include the writing of Mark’s gospel. It conforms to modern scholarship by making Mark’s the oldest of the gospels (tradition made Matthew older) but cheats on chronology (since the gospel is surely later than the dramatic date of 64–5, though there is disagreement whether it preceded or followed the fall of Jerusalem in 70), and follows various Christian traditions, particularly in making Peter Mark’s main source. It shows a plausible process for the composition, as the Christians painstakingly collect and compare memories of Jesus, and its Christians, especially Max von Sydow’s Peter, are more vivid and believable than they are in the novel or other films. Still, in the end, the series avoids suggesting that the gospel could be
anything other than a word-by-word account of the events, uninfluenced by the context of its composition. The memories of Peter and others seem to be a transparent window onto the life of Jesus; despite all the effort the compilation requires, the “historical Jesus” is not really a problem. Similarly, Lygia makes a mosaic of the nativity that combines elements from Mark and Luke just as a nativity play does so that the problems of reconciling different accounts are elided. In the series, once Mark’s work is complete, it is copied for the widest possible dissemination. Scholars disagree about whether the gospels were composed “for all Christians” or for local communities, so the series does not contradict contemporary scholarship on this point – but it chooses the easier alternative, the story that demands the least effort from the viewer who wants the canonical gospels to have authority.\textsuperscript{36} The series stops being rigorously honest where the history really matters.

We are classicists, and the issue behind this book is how the Roman world and its history are represented in film. So for us the novel is a particular event, an influential intervention in reception. It builds on earlier views of the Roman world and crystallizes them in a popular story which then directs, but does not entirely determine, how the films that adapt it show that world. Modern imaginings of Neronian Rome show certain constants, such as the fascination with decadence, and variations, and the \textit{Quo Vadis} films offer a self-limiting field in which we can see those variations at work. Gaffes and anachronisms are important only as they reflect the filmmakers’ interest or lack of interest in how the past looked, or as symptoms of more significant distortions. We concern ourselves with the way in which the different versions reflect the shifting historical situations and ideological concerns of their own times. Just as we are not particular admirers of the novel – to which we cannot do justice in any case, since we do not read Polish, and Sienkiewicz is celebrated for his style – we are not fans of any of the films but each has moments one or both of us has found beautiful, touching, charming, or funny.

We often suggest that the political backgrounds of a particular film are complex and that different elements suggest contradictory interpretations. Most of the versions lack a clear author or \textit{auteur}. In the case of the 1951 \textit{Quo Vadis}, Irving Thalberg bought the rights in 1936, and the treatment emphasized the love story. A team of screenwriters, especially Sam Behrman, worked on it in 1942 and 1943. Sonya Levien reworked it in 1948, bringing it closer to the novel and trying to bring more feeling to the romance. She felt inspired by the anti-totalitarian message of the
film. John Huston was going to direct, and he, with the help of the classical consultant, Hugh Gray, worked to reduce the Christian scenes and emphasize Nero. There was tension between Huston and Louis Mayer, the head of the studio, who wanted an edifying epic. In the end, both director and producer were replaced by Sam Zimbalist and Mervyn LeRoy, and John Mahin was brought in for yet another round of rewriting, this time especially to add spectacle. This is an especially messy history but the construction of films is rarely completely tidy. A film is, as Salman Rushdie has put it, “as near as dammit to that will-o’-the-wisp of modern critical theory, the authorless text” – or, perhaps more precisely, a text with so many authors that we cannot be surprised if its possible meanings fly in various directions.

Notes

1 Throughout this book, Quo Vadis?, with the interrogative, refers to Sienkiewicz’s novel. Without the interrogative it refers to the story more broadly, whether to the legend or the adaptations. Citations of the novel follow the translation of Jeremy Curtin in the 1897 edition published in Boston by Little, Brown.


4 The Quo Vadis? scene is attested (with minor variants) in several apocryphal texts: Martyrium Petri et Pauli 6, Acta Petri et Pauli 82, Ps. Linus 6, in a letter of St Ambrose (epistula 75a [21], fourth century CE), in Ps. Abadias 19 (fourth century CE), Hegesippus 3.2.1 (fourth century CE), and the Passio Processi et Martiniani 1 (sixth century CE). All imply that Christ is going to suffer in Peter when he is crucified. Sienkiewicz, however, bases the eponymous scene on the assumption that Christ would replace Peter if he chose to flee from Rome. See Starowieyski 1997.

5 Cahir 2006; Desmond and Hawkes 2006; Stam and Raengo 2004; Cartmell and Whelehan 1999; Corrigan 1998.


8 On the hybridity of cinema, see Elliott 2003.

9 Chatman 1990.

10 Stam 2000.
Adaptation studies have barely considered this issue. Stam and Raengo 2005: 43–4, distinguishes novels that were originally period pieces from those that become period pieces through the passage of time, but does not examine the sources or reliability of the period piece. Grace 2004 looks at adaptations of the Gospels as unreliable sources.

See the essays in Landy 2001. Neither Davis 2000 nor the essays in Winkler 2006, in examining *Spartacus*, quite address this question.

Paulsen 2007 discusses the novel and the film in relation to the sources’ depiction of Nero but is not critical of Tacitus.

On the sources, see Champlin 2003: 37–52.


Breakwell and Hammond 1990: 39 (Daniel Moyano tells the anecdote as an eyewitness).


Grindon 1994 analyses how both the narratives and the visual effects of historical films convey historical interpretation.


Kreb 2003: 118 may overstate the importance of Ustinov’s performance.

Joshel 2001: 120–1. But the family is also more prominent in cinematic Romes thereafter.

In Eos’ miniseries “Imperium: Nerone” of 2004 (directed by Robert Marcus), the relationship between Nero and Acte is obviously based on that of Vinicius and Lygia.


According to Mansour 2000: 679 (reviewing a recent translation in *The Slavic and East European Journal*), the novel is a recurring topic in Christian chat rooms.

For example, Moody Publishers, a branch of the Moody Bible Institute, published a version abridged by James Bell in 1992.

Miłosz is more guarded in print but is hardly admiring: “[S] did a good job of enlivening all the historical clichés, but his Rome was somewhat too lacking in complexity” (Miłosz 1983: 313).

Gérôme is also very influential on the appearance of Rome in *Gladiator*.


For Alma-Tadema, see Swanson 1977, Barrow 2001.


Giergielewicz 1968: 135. On the website of the Universität Mannheim there is a transcription (Lindner 2005) of an article of 1899 from *Stimmen aus Maria Laach*, a conservative Catholic journal, that translates an article from an American Catholic journal *The Review*, solemnly warning Catholics against the book.

One might compare the controversy over Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. The controversy emphasized Gibson’s choice of sources (the visions of Sister Emmerick); although the reliability of his main sources, the Gospels, was clearly an important issue, most critics avoided confronting it directly. The film makes exceptional claims to historical authenticity, particularly in using ancient languages (the Latin, however, is not historically pronounced, and there is no Greek).

For the issues surrounding the identity of Mark and the composition of his gospel, see Markus 2000: 17–39 (in the Anchor Bible series).

Bauckham 1998 has influentially argued against the view that the Gospels were composed for local communities. Mitchell 2005 cites Patristic evidence on the other side.


Adapting the Narrative

Sienkiewicz’s Novel: Adapting the Story

A comparison of the film versions of Quo Vadis begins with the story itself: which details the films include, what they expand, what they omit, and how they transform the novel in the process of adaptation. The particular narrative qualities of Quo Vadis have powerfully influenced the cinematic versions and through them the popular perception of the Roman world. The most salient issues are the actual portions of the story that are kept, expanded, or dropped (the traditional topics of “fidelity”), but equally important are the effects of casting, acting, and mise-en-scène on the narrative. These, and the camera, join with the story-choices to define the audience’s experience. One question concerns which characters the films make centers of interest: whose story is it? Another – closely related but distinct – concerns how the different versions involve the viewer in the subjectivity of characters (and which characters). Focalization, in which a character actually filters the information about the story that the viewer receives, is controversial and complex in narrative theory generally and especially in film theory.1 Since, however, theoretical precision is unlikely to contribute much to the understanding of these particular films, in this discussion we group together all sequences where cues direct the viewer to identify his or her perceptions with those of the characters, whether or not there is “internal ocularization” – for example, in point-of-view editing, where the audience sees as the character does.2

The novel’s compendious style, with its many characters and episodes, makes it particularly flexible; the adaptor can select widely while maintaining the basic structure of the plot. It offers both opportunities and difficulties for the adaptor. No film, of course, ignores its spectacular set-pieces,
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the banquet in Nero’s palace, the great fire at Rome and the lurid executions of the Christians: a basic problem in filming the novel is that the spectacle can overwhelm the story. The novel weaves together three main narrative lines. The first is a romance between an (initially) arrogant and selfish Roman aristocrat, Marcus Vinicius, and a beautiful Christian hostage from the region that is now Poland, named Lygia. This is entirely fictional. The second is Nero’s persecution of the Christians as Tacitus tells it and the story of Peter’s departure from Rome, his return after a vision of Christ, and martyrdom, based on the second-century *Acts of Peter* and other Christian apocryphal texts. Third is the struggle for survival at court and control of Nero between Petronius, Tigellinus the praetorian prefect, Nero’s wife Poppaea, and other courtiers. Sienkiewicz based this segment on Suetonius and Tacitus. (A fictional subplot follows the love story of Petronius and his slave Eunice.) He links the strands first by making Vinicius Petronius’ nephew and protégé, and by putting Peter and Paul into the Christian circles into which Lygia brings Vinicius and Petronius. Petronius persuades Nero to have Lygia taken from her foster parents in order that she may be transferred to Vinicius. She escapes with the help of her loyal servant, Ursus, but while she is at the palace she rouses the hatred of Nero’s wife Poppaea. Poppaea much later makes sexual advances to Vinicius, which he rejects, fueling her hatred of the couple and the Christians. A seedy pseudo-philosopher named Chilo is hired by Petronius and Vinicius to find Lygia when she hides from Vinicius among the Christians. He later plays an important role along with Poppaea and Tigellinus in persuading Nero to blame the fire on the Christians and briefly becomes a court favorite, until in his horror at Nero’s torture of the martyrs he is converted and dies as a martyr himself. At the end of the novel, the Lygia–Vinicius story ends with a letter describing their placid and happy life in Sicily; then the Christian story ends with the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul; then the Petronius story ends with the suicides of Petronius and Eunice. An epilogue narrates Nero’s flight and suicide. *Quo Vadis?* offers a relatively complex view of the Roman world, largely because of its sympathetic treatment of its liveliest character, Petronius.

Sienkiewicz is not a meticulous narrator. He was a prolific writer and, although his research was extensive, the novel is not a work of careful craft. *Quo Vadis?* first appeared as a serial and it often repeats expository information, probably for the benefit of serial readers. Like many historical novels, it obtrusively displays its research, for example, by using and sometimes glossing Latin terms, from *insula* on the first page. Even as Roman
customs are often explained, character-narrators, especially Petronius, refer freely to people and events that are not explained further, and sometimes the external narrator does too. As a result, for the reader who does not know Roman history and literature of the period in considerable detail, the main characters, who are in sharp focus, are surrounded by too many minor figures and people mentioned in passing to remember. This constant allusion to people and events at the periphery provides a powerful reality effect but the verisimilitude goes beyond a literary effect. It is a constant reminder that this densely populated world, all of it attested in ancient sources, once existed. It insists on the reality of the past and the inability of any novel to convey everything. All the films, not surprisingly, ruthlessly prune the novel’s pedantry and expansiveness since the educational digressions are unentertaining, the allusions distracting, and the mise-en-scène does the work of reality effect.

Sienkiewicz is usually careful in following his sources – his deviations are often interesting. He does not compress chronology or create composite characters. In order to accommodate the historical sequence, in the last chapters, once the persecution of the Christians is past, the relationship between narrative and story-time changes. The opening of Chapter 71 summarizes events between the executions of Peter and Paul and the death of Petronius (the Pisonian conspiracy, the death of Poppaea), while the epilogue allows time to pass before the revolt of Vindex and the collapse of Nero’s reign. The actual lapse of time remains vague. When the narrator begins Chapter 72 with a letter from Vinicius, it is not specified when this letter is composed (somewhere between the failure of the Pisonian conspiracy in 65 and the death of Petronius in 66). All the film versions, in contrast, compress time. Sienkiewicz’s vagueness about actual dates and intervals makes this easy but the ideological result is powerful. The films (with the exception of the 1985 version) include the fall and death of Nero but none uses any device to indicate the passage of time between the persecution of the Christians and the revolt against Nero. Indeed, some versions (the 1925 and the 1951) directly connect them. Nero’s death thereby appears more or less explicitly a divine punishment. The novel certainly allows such a reading but does not insist on it.

The version of 1912 (Italy, dir. Guazzoni) and the version of 2001 (Poland, dir. Kawalerowicz) are literal translations of the novel to the screen. The 1912 version simply extended the earlier practice of dramatizing episodes from novels instead of fully re-imagining the story in cinematic terms. Indeed, at least one contemporary critic already complained
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that it had failed to make the story its own as film. Other, however, defined the film adaptation of a novel as illustration. The 1912 film is a series of moving illustrations. Indeed, it would be difficult to follow for a viewer who did not know the plot already, and the American distributor, George Kleine, produced a pamphlet to accompany the film that provides a plot summary, almost as if it were an opera, along with stills. The summary does not always give more attention to the elements of the plot found in the film. When the film was re-released in 1923, the French version dropped the two opening scenes, so that the film begins with Petronius’ arrival at Nero’s palace. As an independent narrative, this version would be incomprehensible. As illustration, however, it outdoes the original release, since it features elegant Art Deco intertitles, each framed and accompanied by an image symbolizing the following action.

The 2001 Polish version is faithful to the novel precisely because it is a Polish version of a canonical work of Polish literature and stakes its claim to attention firmly on this national connection to the book. It belongs to a recent series of Polish films based on national classics, including With Fire and Sword (1999, also based on Sienkiewicz) and Pan Tadeusz (1999, based on the poem by Adam Mickiewicz). Yet even the 1912 film and the 2001 version make significant changes. The 1912 film adds a chariot race to the arena scene before the gladiators (who are in the novel) and the executions of the Christians, for extra spectacle. The 2001 version moves Peter’s return to Rome to the end, after Nero’s death – a point that will be discussed later – and has Poppaea watch Tigellinus’ beating of Chilo.

The handling of some minor characters is very different in the films. One episode in the novel is completely omitted in all the filmed versions. In Chapter 59, Chilo is introduced by two rabbis to Nero. They have already met with Tigellinus and Poppaea, who is a Judaizer. They vouch for his truthfulness, saying that he had a Jewish mother. He then slanders the Christians and offers to inform on them. In this Sienkiewicz follows Renan’s L’Antechrist, who speculates that the Jews of Rome could have been responsible for accusing the Christians of starting the fire, though Sienkiewicz gives the Jews only a secondary role. None of the filmed versions includes this incident. There is good narrative reason for omitting it since the evil Poppaea and Tigellinus need no further motivations to persuade Nero to blame the Christians, and it is unnecessary baggage within the story; Sienkiewicz presumably included it in order to link his fiction with what he thought was historically correct. Its omission in the films has obvious ideological weight (see below, p. 183).
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The minor Christian characters vary greatly from version to version. In the novel, Pomponia, Lygia’s foster mother, is a Christian, but her husband, the general Aulus Plautius, is not, and she dares not bring up her son, little Aulus, as a Christian. Once Lygia is rescued from Vinicius and hides among the Christians, her foster parents play no further significant role. Crispus is the novel’s representative of the harsher side of Christianity. He warns severely against sin and his preaching has an apocalyptic element. He has two important moments in the novel: he tells Lygia that her love for Marcus is sinful, and is rebuked by Peter and Paul, and he speaks a dying curse upon Nero. Chilo has a subplot of his own. While seeking Lygia for Vinicius, he discovers the Christian physician Glaucus, whose family he once betrayed to robbers, and tries to convince Ursus to murder him. Later Glaucus forgives him and it is the sight of the dying Glaucus that finally inspires Chilo’s conversion.

Glaucus and Crispus are both dropped from the 1925 version. Lygia’s love for Vinicius thus meets no opposition among the Christians. One of the dying women among the living torches curses Chilo (replacing Glaucus’ forgiveness). In this film, Lygia’s entire foster family is Christian, and the film repeatedly exploits little Aulus for pathos (he begs Peter to pray for Lygia’s return, for example). Pomponia manages to save herself when she is dragged behind a chariot in the arena scene, and the crowd spares her and her son. The adult Aulus successfully escapes the arena, climbing up a monument and pulling himself along a garland that extends from it to the stands. So the plot is tighter than the novel’s and the happy ending more complete. In the 1951 version, the little boy is omitted, Chilo appears only to facilitate Vinicius’ attempt to abduct Lygia, and Crispus is completely absent. Aulus Plautius, who again is a Christian, takes on some functions of both Chilo and Crispus: in the arena scene, it is he who denounces Nero from his cross.

The 1925 version makes other significant (and some small) changes. It has Nero issue a proclamation against Christianity near the very beginning over Petronius’ protests. It introduces an attempt by Nero to rape Lygia at the banquet, which Petronius foils by sending a note to Poppaea – Nero is afraid of her and desists immediately when she appears. Peter does not preach a sermon that Vinicius hears before his attempt at kidnapping Lygia; instead Peter preaches in a Christian meeting intercut with Nero’s banquet, and again after Nero announces that the Christians have burned Rome. The arena scene has not only gladiators but a chariot race in which
Christian victims are dragged to death behind the chariots (thus outdoing the spectacle of the 1912). It also has the coming of Galba announced during the arena scene. Petronius receives a letter announcing Galba’s revolt, and sends Vinicius out to try to raise a revolt in the city in time to save Lygia. Chilo denounces Nero before the people and Nero shoots an arrow and kills him. The intertitle reads: “Having silenced the prosecutor for ever, Nero thought he had silenced the people, too.” Petronius shows him the letter: *The mutinous legions of Spain and Gaul have proclaimed Galba emperor and are marching on Rome.* Nero then threatens Petronius and warns him to go home. The next episode shows Petronius’ suicide at a banquet (an intertitle explains that he had expected this outcome and invited his guests already) before the scene returns to the arena (Petronius’ death actually seems unnecessary since Vinicius leads a revolt within the city almost immediately); the temporal sequence here is not clear. Interspersed with the arena sequences, intertitles continue the progress of the overthrow of Nero:

> The city welcomed the news of Galba’s revolt – for it was not war against Rome, but war upon the tyrant Nero.

> The metropolitan legions under the guidance of Vinicius open revolt [sic] against Nero and proclaim Galba emperor.

These changes in the 1925 version have ideological functions but at the simplest level they make the story tighter and easier to convey in silent film. If Vinicius does not hear Peter preach before his attack on Lygia, there is no need to explain the slow working of what he hears. The fall of Nero is already prepared during the arena scenes. The film’s characteristic technique is cutting between contrasting scenes, and the changes offer a reason to move from the arena to Petronius’ house and back again. The various changes also give Petronius a more active and positive role.

Similarly, while there are various reasons for the changes in the 1951 version, narrative simplicity is clearly among them. Giving the Crispus–Chilo function of denouncing Nero to Aulus both picks up a loose end in the novel and makes the plot simpler. Both the 1925 and the 1951 versions introduce Galba’s revolt sooner so as to unify the narrative but this tighter structure also, as already noted, points a moral. The 1985 version, in contrast, retains and varies the subplots, having six episodes and thus no pressure to compress the narrative. Instead, the subplots provide more
opportunities to generate suspense in the viewer and keep him or her watching. As we would expect, each episode ends with a cliffhanger. At the end of part 1, Lygia is abducted by Nero’s soldiers. In the last shot of part 2, the murdered Pedanius is discovered, and the end of episode 3 brings the peak of the tension between Christians and the authorities over the crucifixion of Pedanius’ slaves. At the end of part 4, Chilo and Poppaea try to persuade Nero to present the Christians as scapegoats and Petronius, who defends the Christians, is about to fall in disgrace. At the end of part 5, the executions of Christians begin, but the spectator does not yet know what will happen to the protagonists. Since the first part of the novel is not very suspenseful, the murder mystery provides vital narrative interest.

**Focalizers, Judgments, and Petronius**

Sienkiewicz is generous in voicing his own moral judgments. Character focalization is frequent and variable but is rarely completely independent of the narrator (except in the epistolary sections, where characters are both narrators and focalizers). So, for example, in Chapter 7 (53–4), we hear of Acte’s admiration of Lygia:

> It became clear at once that in the young Grecian, in spite of her sadness and her perusal of the letters of Paul of Tarsus, there was yet much of the ancient Hellenic spirit, to which physical beauty spoke with more eloquence than aught else on earth. When she had undressed Lygia, she could not restrain an exclamation of wonder at the sight of her form, at once slender and full, created, as it were, from pearl and roses; and stepping back a few paces, she looked with delight on that matchless, spring-like form.

To whom is it clear that Acte’s response is the result of her being a Greek? Presumably the narrator who is watching and drawing this inference. Who is thinking here about “pearl and roses”? The strategy is precisely that of the toga movie. The narrator distances himself from the gaze even as he joins in it. The (presumably Christian) reader is reminded that he (and the implied reader here is male) knows better than to treat such beauty as the greatest good, yet the narrator’s stress on it invites the reader to imagine the naked girl, while the focalization through the woman’s eyes defines the pleasure of this spectacle as purely aesthetic instead of erotic.
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This particular moment in the novel appears only in the 2001 film where Lygia’s breasts are displayed to the spectator and Acte’s admiration authorizes the gaze.

Sienkiewicz offers access to the thoughts of all his sympathetic characters and at some point focalizes through all of them. Indeed, in the novel access to point of view and audience sympathy are closely aligned: though we sometimes hear what Nero is thinking, we never enter closely into the thoughts or perceptions of Nero, Poppaea, and Tigellinus. The extent to which we see through Chilo’s eyes foreshadows his eventual conversion. Large stretches of the novel take place in the consciousness of Vinicius; we enter the Christian milieu through him, just as we first see Nero’s court through Lygia. But since the most important character for both focalization and narrator’s commentary in the novel is Petronius, he is the appropriate figure around whom to center a discussion of how the films manage the perennial problem of adapting the narrator’s voice.

The historical Petronius is known only from a brief entry in Tacitus Annales 16.18–19:

With regard to Caius Petronius, it is appropriate to look back briefly. For him, days passed in sleep, nights in the business and pleasures of life. As hard work has brought others fame, laziness brought it to him, and he was considered not a glutton and waster, like most of those who drink up their property, but a man of learned extravagance. And indeed his talk and actions, the more relaxed they were and the more they displayed a certain carelessness, the more they were received with pleasure as indications of straightforwardness. Yet as proconsul of Bithynia and soon afterwards as consul, he showed himself energetic and capable in business. Then falling back into vice or the imitation of vice, he was selected by Nero into his small inner circle, as the authority on good taste. The emperor thought nothing delightful or charming in opulence, unless Petronius had commended it to him. Hence came Tigellinus’s resentment, as against a rival and someone more capable in the knowledge of pleasures. And so he addresses the emperor’s cruelty, to which other desires gave way, charging that Petronius was a friend of Scaevinus: a slave was bribed to inform; the possibility of a defense was taken away; and most of his household was arrested.

By chance at that time the emperor had headed for Campania and Petronius, after going as far as Cumae, was detained there. He did not put up with delays caused by fear or hope any longer. Yet he did not give up his life in a rush, but when his veins had been cut open he had them bound up and opened again, as he pleased, while he talked with his friends, not about serious subject or the kinds of things by which he could seek glory for being
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resolute. And he listened to recitations – nothing about the immortality of
the soul and the opinions of philosophers, but trivial poetry and light verses.
To some of his slaves he gave presents, others blows. He went into dinner,
indulged himself in sleep, so that his death, though forced, would seem
spontaneous. Even in his will he did not, as most of the dying did, flatter
Nero or Tigellinus or any other of the powerful, but he wrote out fully the
emperor’s outrages, with the names of his male prostitutes and women and
the innovation involved in each obscene act, and after sealing it he sent it to
Nero. And he broke his signet-ring, in order that it could not be used for
causing danger to others in the future.

Most scholars believe that this Petronius was the author of the fragmentary
novel known as the Satyricon, though this cannot be certain, and Sienkie-
wicz assumes that he was.10

Sienkiewicz’s explicit comments on his Petronius are slightly at odds
with the sympathy he invites for the character. He describes Petronius as a
pure aesthete, incapable of cruelty only because it violates his sensibilities.
When Petronius and Vinicius visit Aulus Plautius, the narrator explains that
Petronius is very popular with the Roman mob (18–19):

They loved him for his munificence; and his peculiar popularity increased
from the time when they learned that he had spoken before Caesar in opposi-
tion to the sentence of death issued against the whole “familia,” that is,
against all the slaves of the prefect Pedanius Secundus, without distinction
of sex or age, because one of them had killed that monster in a moment of
despair. Petronius repeated in public, it is true, that it was all one to him,
and that he had spoken to Caesar only privately, as the arbiter elegantiarum
whose aesthetic taste was offended by a barbarous slaughter befitting Scyth-
ians and not Romans. Nevertheless, people who were indignant because of
the slaughter loved Petronius from that moment forth.

While the narrator seems to direct the reader to take Petronius at his word,
when he says that Petronius said “in public” that he was not acting out of
pity for the slaves, a reader may suspect that Petronius is protesting too
much. Since the narrator never provides a systematic basis for Petronius’
aesthetic judgments, it is quite possible that he translates humane feeling
into aesthetic terms.

Throughout the novel, the court of Nero is portrayed mainly from the
point of view of Petronius, whether he overtly focalizes or not. Petronius
frequently behaves in a way that the reader approves and when he does not,
it is the result of a particular, culturally determined moral blindness. On
the first page of the novel, we hear that the night before, Petronius, Nero, Lucan, and Seneca debated whether women possessed a soul. We do not hear what side of the question Petronius took but he shows a consistent willingness to treat women or social inferiors as objects. He loathes the common people because they are smelly and dirty; his snobbery is limitless. Yet even his disgust with the smell of the people can be hard to evaluate. When he complains about the smell of the plebeians after he saves Nero from the people’s anger (QV 46, 360), this fastidiousness blatantly replaces any sign of relief when he has just risked his life.

From the beginning, slippery focalization complicates audience response. If the reader does not share Petronius’ disdain for ordinary people because they sweat, his is the only voice to describe the popular response to the killing of Pedanius’ slaves, and in the absence of any defense of the people’s fickleness, the narrator invites the reader to share his contempt.

Men with the odor of roast beans, which they carried in their bosoms, and who besides were eternally hoarse and sweating from playing mora [a Roman game similar to “Rock, Paper, Scissors”] on the street-corners and peristyles, did not in his eyes deserve the term “human.” Hence he gave no answer whatever to the applause, or the kisses sent from lips here and there to him. He was relating to Marcus the case of Pedanius, reviling meanwhile the fickleness of that rabble which, next morning after the terrible butchery, applauded Nero on his way to the temple of Jupiter Stator (QV 2, 19.)

Similarly, when he hears the people shouting for the Christians to be thrown to the lions, Petronius reflects that a society of such cruelty could not be sustained and that only the Christians offer a “new basis of life” (QV 50, 389) – like other authors in his genre, Sienkiewicz ignores the two and a half centuries that were to intervene before Christianity became dominant in the empire.

Again, Petronius repeatedly acts in a way that is helpful to Vinicius but repellent to modern sensibilities. He responds to Vinicius’ desire for Lygia by concocting a scheme to have custody of her transferred to Vinicius without for a moment considering her feelings. When Vinicius is disconso late, Petronius tries to cheer him up by giving him another beautiful woman, his own slave Eunice. When he discovers Eunice’s love for him and makes her his mistress, although he frees her and makes her his heir, he thinks regretfully about suicide because he is “sorry for Eunice and my Myrrhene vase” (QV 50, 382). He loves her, but not more than his favorite precious object.
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Petronius has, according to the narrator, no morals or human compassion at all, until late in the novel:

He was an Epicurean and an egotist, but passing time, now with Paul of Tarsus, now with Vinicius, hearing daily of the Christians, he had changed somewhat without his own knowledge. A certain breeze from them had blown on him; this cast new seeds into his soul. Besides his own person others began to occupy him; moreover, he had been always attached to Vinicius, for in childhood he had loved greatly his sister, the mother of Vinicius; at present, therefore, when he had taken part in his affairs, he looked on them with that interest with which he would have looked on some tragedy. (QV 50, 387)

Yet by this point, we have seen Petronius’ concern for Vinicius throughout the novel. The proliferation of motives is excessive and the Christian influence unnecessary to explain why Petronius is so concerned.

Sienkiewicz, however, repeatedly implies that only Christians and their sympathizers care about other people except those closest to themselves. When strangers who are trying to create a firebreak rescue Vinicius during the fire, for example, they turn out to be Christians. Sienkiewicz implies that pagan Romans would not have acted for the common good (43, 337). This tension between Sienkiewicz’s tendency to attribute all good exclusively to Christians and his fidelity to the sources appears in other connections, too. Vinicius has been tutored by Musonius (the Stoic Musonius Rufus, QV 2, 26). Yet the narrator says of him, as Ursus cares for him among the Christians, that he has never considered the humanity of ordinary people or wondered what they thought before (QV 27, 214). This is not just a defect in the personality of Vinicius but is characteristic of Romans: “Before that, as generally in life and in feeling, he had been, like all people of that time, a blind, unconditional egotist, who thought only of himself” (QV 26, 215). Yet there seem to be exceptions, since among the final victims of Nero “the great Thrasea was ruined by his virtue” (QV 71, 523).

Petronius ignores the sexual behavior of his slaves because he dislikes punishing them and because he is “worldly and understanding”; but he regards people outside his own social class as barely human, and the narrator says that “a slave who ventured to beg relief from the fulfillment of a command, who said ‘I will not and I cannot’ was something so unheard-of in Rome that Petronius could not believe his own ears at first” (QV 12, 106–7) – although, in real life, elite Romans had their business affairs
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managed by trusted slaves and freedmen. This tension in the novel between Petronius’ coldness, snobbery, and selfishness, and the actual decency of many of his actions, tends in film to be resolved so that he becomes a basically kind, though profoundly cynical, man.

Petronius’ loathing for common people demonstrates Sienkiewicz’s difficulties with the *Satyricon*. Near the beginning of the novel, Petronius stops on his way to the house of Aulus Plautius and buys a fancy copy for Vinicius, recommending especially that he read *Trimalchio’s Feast*. The novel barely alludes to Petronius’ book again, and then only to the Trimalchio scene. While it is certainly possible to read the *Satyricon* as an expression of utter disgust with the Roman world, it is almost impossible to imagine Sienkiewicz’s Petronius as its author because he would never have been able to experience the life of his characters and would not have wanted ever to imagine it. Sienkiewicz’s Petronius is rigorously heterosexual, while a central theme of the extant fragments of the *Satyricon* is the characters’ rivalry over the boy Giton. Furthermore, there is no trace in Sienkiewicz’s character of the furious energy of the *Satyricon*’s freedmen and low-lifes. Although the novel’s Petronius is as far from being a moralist as he could be, the Roman world we see through his eyes is more that of Juvenal than that of the *Satyricon*. Furthermore, Sienkiewicz is faithful to Tacitus in mentioning Petronius’ competence as governor of Bithynia but has Petronius himself think of this success only as a proof that he could have done well in a conventional Roman political career had he wished.

Petronius is not just an important secondary focalizer in the novel but also a central character and a figure of focal interest – someone the reader should care about. The very first pages of the novel suggest, through his questioning of Vinicius about possibly dangerous habits (charioteering, composing poetry), how tricky it is at court. He has published the *Satyricon* without his name because it could be dangerous to him. When Aulus visits Seneca to ask for his advice about recovering Lygia, his response is summarized: “He did not advise him, either, to go to Tigellinus or Vatinius or Vitelius. It might be possible to do something with them through money; perhaps, also, they would like to do evil to Petronius, whose influence they were trying to undermine” (*QV* 5, 40). The Eunice plot also begins in the first chapter. As she arranges Petronius’ toga, the narrator informs us that she secretly loves Petronius. Petronius, though, does not notice her adoring look; and after he leaves, the narrator lingers with her, describing how she kisses his statue. This immediately creates narrative tension. A love story between them must develop but we do not know how it will develop.
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The failure of the usually perceptive Petronius to notice invites the reader, like Eunice, to watch him. In 1937, an anonymous reader asked other readers of the journal *Notes and Queries* whether the historical sources for Petronius justified his attractive presentation in Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis*? One E. Bentley (who had not read the novel) responded by quoting the relevant passage of Tacitus and adding “a writer of fiction, capable of anything, may no doubt make this a pleasant character.” He added, of the *Satyricon*, that it is “clever and valuable for the life of the time, but contains much that is frankly disgusting.”

Petronius as Focal Character

At the very beginning of the novel, Petronius awakes close to noon after a long night of dissipation, feeling drained and tired. Sienkiewicz’s opening establishes the view of the Roman world that the novel will develop. Petronius is hung over because he has been partying at the palace but we learn in the first sentence that he “always” feels drained and without energy when he awakes. By the end of the paragraph, though, “an hour or two” at the baths, with a massage, restores his vitality and makes him again “the undisputed arbiter of all that was elegant and tasteful.” Petronius’ dissipation and poor health mark the Roman world as in decline from the opening words of this long story: but the repeated allusions to his genuine taste show that world as possessing something of genuine value. The novel proper closes with his death, in which “poetry and beauty,” the only remaining values of the Roman world, also perish (*QV* 73, 535); the end of Nero is a mere epilogue.

Petronius’ importance distinguishes *Quo Vadis?* from the other nineteenth-century historical fictions that have been the basis for so many films – from Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii*, General Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur*, and Wilson Barrett’s play *The Sign of the Cross* (as well as from L. Douglas’s *The Robe* of 1941). All deal with the coming of Christianity and all show some basic similarities of plot. None of the others, however, has an important and sympathetic Roman character who does not become a Christian. Indeed, the main characters of *Ben-Hur* are Jews and not fully within pagan Roman culture from the start; the one “good” Roman, Ben-Hur’s adoptive father Arrius, is peripheral. In
Wilson Barrett’s play *The Sign of the Cross*, composed at the same time as *Quo Vadis?* and set in exactly the same period, the romance between Marcus Superbus, the prefect of Rome, and the virtuous Christian girl Mercia is very similar to the romance in *Quo Vadis?* between Marcus Vinicius, Petronius’ nephew, and the Christian Lygia – except that Sienkiewicz contrives a happy ending for his lovers. In both, the young man’s love for the Christian maiden is tested by the vamp empress, Poppaea, who seeks in revenge to destroy his beloved when he rejects her. The importance of Petronius to *Quo Vadis?*, however, makes it very different from *The Sign of the Cross*. It is in some ways closer to, for example, Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), which has as its main characters Greeks (and an evil Egyptian), all marginalized in the Roman world and struggling to find meaning for their lives when they have no possibility of meaningful political action. The good characters of *Last Days* are aesthetes and kind hedonists until, after the destruction of the city, an epilogue reports that they become Christians; Christianity seems less a transcendental truth than the only connection to the future that is available.

From the start, the Rome of *Quo Vadis?* cannot win in a contest with Christianity in the reader’s mind because the author has defined Rome as close to exhaustion; but the opening carefully avoids defining Roman culture as evil. In the second paragraph, Sienkiewicz explains that even Nero recognized that Petronius’ baths, though smaller and less ornate than the imperial baths, were better decorated. Petronius’ exquisite taste thus stands in contrast to vulgar display. Still later in the chapter, Petronius tells his nephew that his household is “only” four hundred, for only a nouveau riche thinks he needs more personal slaves than that. The reader is thus encouraged to view Petronius ironically. He participates in a system of absurd conspicuous consumption and his contempt for those who are even more wasteful in their display of wealth defines the distance between the modern reader and the Roman – especially since the modern reader does not approve of slavery at all. Yet no character within the novel critiques Petronius’ judgments except from the Christian perspective whose premises are utterly different; even though the reader does not entirely identify with Petronius, his views are a constant point of reference and carry a certain authority.

Although all five films retain Petronius in an important role, they organize the story differently and transform its thematic emphasis, partially
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displacing Petronius from his role as focalizer and guide. The 1912 version makes Vinicius the only focal character because his romance with Lygia is the only source of ongoing narrative tension. Although the film’s action, like the novel, begins with Petronius’ massage, nothing suggests his exhaustion. There are several masseurs, all men (in the novel, they are all beautiful women); an intertitle announces: “Petronius, a friend of Caesar, greets his nephew Vinicius, newly returned from the Armenian Wars.” A slave enters, followed by Vinicius. The initial world of the film is entirely private, despite Petronius’ connection with Caesar – nothing points to the importance of court intrigue in the story. When Petronius goes to Nero to ask him to give Lygia to Vinicius, he sits beside Nero, who is reclining on a couch, and although other courtiers are present, the conversation appears intimate. Petronius is closely linked to others; he does not have a special or privileged relation to the camera or the narrator.

In the novel, this meeting with Nero is very briefly summarized (27, at the beginning of Chapter 4), so that our first view of Nero in this film is at the banquet; but it was evidently easier to show this action than to risk confusing the audience or to slow the film with more intertitles. Petronius’ antagonism with Tigellinus is introduced only after the fire in the discussion of possible scapegoats, when Petronius urges Nero to have the courage to declare himself the arsonist, so the film raises concern about his fate only near its end. When Petronius announces to Eunice that Nero has condemned him to death, no motive is evident.

The 1912 version is in tableau style. In one very common type of shot, the main characters are stage-front, while others behind them provide depth. Sometimes the important characters stand before the camera looking away at others, so that we see almost what they see. So when Petronius first sees Lygia in Aulus’ garden, Aulus draws back a curtain and he, his wife, Petronius and Vinicius all look out to where Lygia plays with her foster brother. The overt quasi-theatricality is typical of the film which is full of entrances and exits through rear doorways and arches, showing a delight in the camera’s superior ability to show depth compared to the proscenium theater. Farewell scenes are an especially important device for regulating emotional response: when Lygia is taken from her parents, her foster brother runs back to embrace her; when she is taken from Acte, Acte goes with her to the door. In other shots, strong gestures convey feeling while beautiful textiles provide visual interest (see Plate 2.1, Lygia with Acte). In Nero’s banquet, the camera first shows Vinicius’ advances to Lygia, then the drunken crowd
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("The orgy amuses the guests" is the intertitle in one copy), then Vinicius and Lygia with the drunken crowd behind them, so that we can appreciate the complete lack of interest of the other guests in helping Lygia, in contrast with Acte’s futile attempt to pull Vinicius away and Ursus’ sudden intervention.

The 1912 film presents the story mostly neutrally and externally – the camera does not align itself with anyone. The film is sometimes simply careless. As already noted, its plot would be hard to follow for anyone who did not already know it. For example, when Poppaea meets Lygia in the imperial garden, her child is completely hidden in a basket carried by a slave so that the later intertitle that Nero thinks Lygia has bewitched his daughter has no preparation. (A similar problem arises in the 2001 version.) Indeed, only when “Ursus and the Christians” ambush Lygia do we have reason to think that she is a Christian. Since the film includes so many of the actions of the novel with limited means, it is telegraphic – scenes are very short. This makes Petronius an especially difficult character since so

Plate 2.1 Lygia with Acte. Source: 1912. Producer: Cines; Library of Congress

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much depends on his ironic conversation. His role of aesthetic arbiter is not there.

Yet that is not the only change. Although the Eunice plot is retained, nothing remains of the tension that surrounds Petronius’ standing at court in the novel. Petronius is also less sympathetically portrayed. He carries a thin cane, whose primary function is probably to make him readily identifiable since otherwise he is not easy to distinguish from Vinicius. Sienkiewicz mentions this cane only late in the novel when Petronius calms the mob after Nero’s appearance on the aqueduct after the fire (QV 46, 358), although he says that Petronius carried it “habitually.” In the novel, it is introduced here to stress Petronius’ courage – he goes among the crowd with no weapon. In the 1912 film, we see it from the start (see Plate 2.2). Petronius has no trouble walking (and goes everywhere in a litter anyway), so it marks him as a dandy. It is an affectation. However, he often holds it in a threatening way, pointing with it or holding it in both hands as if he might strike out with it. It is a swagger stick. This is especially clear

Plate 2.2 Petronius advises Nero against scapegoating the Christians. Source: 1912. Producer: Cines; Library of Congress

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in the scene after Eunice has been whipped when he asks, “Have you been punished enough?” and she says, “Yes, master” – as he gestures, as if he might use it to beat her again.

Petronius, however, comes into his own as protagonist in the sequence following the fire. The people are accusing Nero and Petronius agrees to speak to them. The camera first follows him as he leaves and then, after the intertitle quotes his promise of help from Caesar, looks out with him over the crowd (Plate 2.3). When Nero decides to use the Christians as scapegoats, he tries to convince Nero to accept blame for the fire. Sienkiewicz explains why:

He thought of the danger hanging over Lygia and over Vinicius, whom he loved, and over all those people whose religion he rejected, but of whose innocence he was certain. He thought also that one of those bloody orgies would begin which his eyes, those of an aesthetic man, could not suffer. But above all he thought: “I must save Vinicius, who will go mad if that maiden perishes”; and this consideration outweighed every other, for Petronius...
understood well that he was beginning a game far more perilous than any in his life. (QV 48, 373)

Without Sienkiewicz’s comments, however, and the extensive judgments of Petronius he has already made, Petronius in this part of the 1912 film is simply a good man, and when he describes the execution of the Christians as “a spectacle worthy of you, Caesar,” the audience can accept his view of the scene – especially since the camera here alternates among the imperial box, the lions, who are shot from a slight elevation, and Petronius and Vinicius behind Nero. Although this is not quite the view Petronius has, it is close enough to promote identification with Petronius and Vinicius as disgusted spectators.

The 1925 version is radically different: it begins with intertitles describing Rome, and a view of the city: “Thirty years after the crucifixion, the Roman Empire was at the height of its wealth and power. Rome, on her seven hills, was mistress of the world. Rome at its apex is a powerful vortex drawing in all of the empire’s vices and virtues – a crucible of might and courage, beauty and corruption.”

A further intertitle introduces Nero: “And on her splendid throne, a satyr – cunning, indolent, cruel – master of the world, but never of himself. Nero – emperor and sixth of the emperors . . . Emil Jannings.” The camera shows Nero/Jannings himself, lying on a couch (see plate 2.4). In the next, wider shot, he is at an outdoor party, where his first action is to have a young woman thrown into a pool of lampreys.

The choice of the opening sequence is entirely appropriate to what follows. From 1925 onwards, Nero tends to escape the subordinate role he has in Sienkiewicz and to become the central figure: he is the star, drawing the viewer’s fascinated revulsion. He is even less human than he is in the novel: in the 1925 version, for example, the child of Nero and Poppaea who dies is, unhistorically, a son instead of a daughter, so that the viewer can assume that Nero is grieved mainly for his dynastic ambitions. Jannings dominates the film with his maniacal energy. For example, in the novel, the possibility that Nero will become sexually interested in Lygia worries Petronius and Vinicius and arouses Poppaea’s jealousy, which is important in the plot. In the 1925 film, he actually tries to rape her, twice: during the banquet at the palace, Petronius sends a note to Poppaea, and he is instantly intimidated when she appears. Later, Nero has a nightmare about his mother, whom he murdered. Nero is the only character to whose inner life the viewer has access, but he is completely evil. Visiting a soothsayer for
help in interpreting the dream, he accidentally finds Lygia, and attacks her again. This time, Ursus rescues her. Nero gains in importance in later versions, too. The most memorable aspect of the 1951 film is Peter Ustinov’s Nero, and Klaus Maria Brandauer dominates the 1985 version.

The opening of the 1951 film is reminiscent of the beginning of the 1925 version. It starts with an introduction showing captives being driven to Rome while a voice-over describes Rome’s tyranny. Just as the 1925 film mentions Rome’s seven hills, evoking the viewer’s previous knowledge of the city, the 1951 cites the proverb “all roads lead to Rome.” The voice-over uses present tenses, while referring to the crucifixion in the past and to the success of Christianity in the future, ending by describing the present film as “the story of that immortal conflict.”

The 1951 film’s narrative proper begins with Vinicius, who is returning to Rome with his troops, and moves to a direct presentation of the beginning of the Vinicius–Lygia romance, which in the novel and the earlier films is narrated by Vinicius to Petronius. Vinicius is in a chariot. When Vinicius
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hears that his troops must camp outside Rome, he rides furiously to the city and rushes into the palace where he stops at a military security post to demand an audience with Nero. The scene then moves to a close-up of Nero who is curled up on a couch, singing, and moves back as he asks Seneca’s opinion about a poetic question. He then turns to Petronius (the camera is just above and behind Petronius’ head). The following scene demonstrates Petronius’ ability to manipulate Nero, the hostility of Tigellinus to Petronius, and Petronius’ concern for Vinicius. While in the other versions, as in the novel, Vinicius’ stay at Aulus’ house and first encounters with Lygia are narrated to Petronius after they take place, here Petronius explains to Vinicius that he has arranged for him to spend the night with Aulus Plautius.

Vinicius is thus the central character and the main focus of interest from the start. The following episode, as Vinicius is confused by the Christian household, urges the viewer to follow him as he gains understanding. Paul suggests to Aulus’ family that Vinicius would be a wonderful convert, though Lygia comments that it would be a miracle, and the main narrative tension is thereby clearly defined as to how Vinicius’ attraction to Lygia will lead to his conversion. At the same time, the opening scenes have initiated the Eunice plot (Petronius mentions his beautiful Spanish slave to Vinicius) and the court plot. They also indicate that Nero will be important but neither a character with whom we sympathize nor a filter. The film shows us the banquet from Nero’s perspective when we look with him through the emerald he carries on his ring and uses as a lens: Nero’s view is strange and wrong so that even when we see with him we never share his responses. Similarly, at Vinicius’ triumph, we watch from his balcony which is implausibly high up. The film removes Petronius’ snobbery and loathing for the smell and dirt of the common people but emphasizes Nero’s disgust for them so it is appropriate that he looks down on them from high above.

In the first hour of the very long 1951 film, though, we never see Nero when Petronius is not present. Almost every remark of Nero’s is followed by a response from Petronius, and it is clear that the ironic flattery of Petronius is the only mechanism that keeps Nero under any rational control. We finally see Nero without Petronius when he contemplates his model of the new Rome in the company of the architect; he expresses his nervousness about how Petronius will react to his vision. He finally sends for Petronius and the rest of the court to unveil the model just before Tigellinus arrives with the news that Rome is burning. While Nero plays
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with his model, Petronius is playing chess: Nero is a child, Petronius his adult guardian.

Petronius is thus a secondary center of interest and, in the first part, the filter through which we see Nero. In the 1951 film, the secondary courtiers are removed; Nero is surrounded by Petronius, Seneca, and Lucan on one side, Tigellinus and Poppaea on the other. Most strikingly, this film removes the episode in which Petronius calms the people after Nero sings to them from the aqueduct during the fire (278–81). Instead, Poppaea, angry that Vinicius left her to try to rescue Lygia in Rome, proposes the plan to blame the Christians as soon as Nero is worried about the people’s anger over the fire. In this version, Petronius is never really implicated in Nero’s crimes because he never really serves him but controls him in the public interest. Once Petronius loses the argument over the Christians, he plans his suicide: Petronius seems to define himself as the film does, as serving the function of controlling Nero, and when he no longer can manage him, he dies, after signing a letter inviting Galba to Rome and regretting that he did not act sooner to overthrow Nero. His suicide thus takes place before the Christians are killed and it is followed by a long scene, unique to this version, in which Nero receives first the news of his death and indulges in histrionic grief before he finally reads Petronius’ letter. (The 2001 version shows Nero’s explosion of rage immediately after the suicide scene). In the 1951 film, Petronius’ vision continues to govern our view of Nero, even after Petronius is dead; in the arena scene, Seneca and Lucan say that they envy him. Furthermore, Petronius refers to the possibility of an afterlife in his suicide scene (as Tacitus tells us he did not). Sienkiewicz says that his guests realized that with the deaths of Petronius and Eunice perished “all that was left to their world at that time – beauty and poetry” (417); the film has Seneca pronounce that with Petronius has perished “all that was best of our Roman world.” The film gives him moral weight and ignores the disreputable Satyricon completely.

The 1985 version begins as Vinicius, with a single companion (clearly a soldier), rides towards the camera through a lightly wooded landscape. A voice-over recites a letter from Petronius: “In the tenth year of Nero’s reign. Gaius Petronius to Marcus Vinicius. Dearest Nephew . . .” The next shot shows three old women in a shack, huddled around a small fire, as Vinicius rides by. He continues to ride along what appears to be the wall of Rome. He passes a slaughtered pig and a large man who stares at him, then an immense cage of lions built against the walls, and more animal carcasses. Meanwhile, the remembered letter warns him
that he will find Rome changed. Nero has removed Seneca and governs alone, while “augurs, diviners, read the signs of fate everywhere.” He expresses a general fear of disaster, a feeling that Rome has lost divine favor. There is thus a double focalization. The three women evoke the witches of Macbeth. The lions advise the viewer that at some point the film will show them attacking victims. The dead animals and staring man are vaguely ominous, at least when we see them, as also Vinicius must, through the filter of Petronius’ words. The credits follow this sequence, whose isolation thereby establishes it as a significant preface for all that will follow.

In this first sequence, the voice-over from Petronius could be understood as the thoughts of Marcus. Yet it recurs again as the first episode proper begins, even though now a different character wanders through Rome, a man who is soon revealed to be a Christian bringing texts containing testimonies of the words of Jesus. A letter of Petronius to Seneca is offered as voice-over to introduce a Christian project of gathering and collating such written testimonies; Petronius mentions Seneca’s remarks on a new sect whose ideas shed light on the writings of the followers of Moses which Seneca has lent Petronius. Petronius is interested in meeting the followers of this new religion. The voice-over occurs yet again when Vinicius sees Pomponia for the first time in Plautius’ house (“I can’t tell what is behind her look of serene solitude, but certainly it attracts me”). Petronius thus has an authority that he does not have in the novel or any of the earlier films. The technique itself tends to blur the character Petronius with an impersonal authoritative voice. Since we, the viewers, know that his fear for the future of pagan Rome is justified, and since the landscape that Vinicius sees seems to confirm the words Petronius has written (even as the words may be determining how we view the landscape), we are led to trust Petronius from the start. He says that there are few “real” Romans anymore but that this change in Rome does not bother him; the Petronius of this version lacks the snobbery of Sienkiewicz’s character – it is with him and with his help that we watch the vivid and exotic street life that this version places before us. His apparently sympathetic interest in Christianity marks him as good. Since Petronius’ letter no sooner mentions the prospect of Vinicius’ return than it turns to Nero, we can guess immediately that Nero will be central to what follows but we also accept Petronius as our guide. In this version, it is Petronius who tells Marcus Lygia’s story, not the other way around.
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If the 1985 version later leaves Petronius for considerable periods, it also places him again in the center of audience identification when he is assigned the responsibility for investigation into the murder of Pedanius Secundus. The detective is a familiar figure in modern narrative and audiences are both accustomed to treating the detective as sympathetic protagonist and to assuming that the detective will filter information. We follow Petronius as he follows the last hours of Pedanius. Furthermore, this Petronius lacks most of the unappealing qualities of Sienkiewicz’s. From the beginning, Eunice is his confidante and assistant; their sexual relationship begins when Petronius seeks her comfort. Petronius is shown opening his house to refugees from the fire. In this version, Petronius is still working on the *Satyricon*. The brothel operator Epichar collects material for him while minor characters are named Eumolpus and Gito, names from the *Satyricon*. The mise-en-scène of the miniseries frequently recalls the visual style of Fellini’s *Satyricon*, so that the Rome we see is very precisely the Rome of Petronius.

At the same time, this version more than any other shows Nero independently, unfiltered by Petronius. Brandauer had a coherent view of Nero as an extreme artist, a view very much in the spirit of late twentieth-century “performance art.” Even though we depend less on Petronius for our view of this Nero than we do in other versions, Petronius guides the viewer through the politics of the court. His refusal either to participate in the Pisonian conspiracy or to betray it is one of the unifying themes of the miniseries; he is the intermediary and balance between Nero and his enemies.

The 2001 version accompanies the credits with a close-up of the Flavian amphitheater (Coliseum). The camera slowly circles the building as cries of “Ave Caesar” resound inside and the credits then appear over it. This move is especially meaningful because *Gladiator*, with its computerized restoration of the same building, was an international success in 2000. Like the lions in the 1985 version, the shot tells the audience where the story will go. Because the camera looks at the building in its present state and from outside, while the shouts of the (imagined) crowd are within, it creates distance between the film’s audience and the audience inside, and between present and past. It announces the film’s membership in the genre of the toga movie, for which the amphitheater is the symbol but expresses a certain detachment from it.

It simultaneously attaches the film to Catholic tradition. In 1750, Pope Benedict XIV declared the Coliseum a memorial for Christian
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martyrs of antiquity. Under the papacy of John Paul II, every year on
the evening of Good Friday the liturgy of the Stations of the Cross
would be broadcast live from the Coliseum, connecting the passion of
Christ to the passion of early martyrs. While the opening shot clearly
directs the viewer to see this film in competition with Gladiator, when
the film returns to the amphitheater for the arena scenes, it evokes this
Catholic association.

After the credits, we see in close-up the bare shoulder and part of the
torso of a man as the much darker hand of another person caresses it. This
is Petronius as he receives a massage; the atmosphere is steamy and we can
see the oil on his skin. The dark hand orientalizes the sequence and poten-
tially feminizes Petronius, since the woman bathed by a black slave is a
cliché of orientalizing paintings of the harem, but this impression is modi-
fied once Vinicius arrives and Petronius displays his wit and liveliness.
(Most of the attendants are beautiful women but there is one older man
among them.) Petronius does not convey the exhaustion Sienkiewicz attrib-
utes to the character.

The Petronius of the 2001 film is not modified to make him a suitable
figure for audience identification. He is perhaps more cynical than the
character in the novel and a shade more brutal: in the scene in which he
quarrels with Vinicius, he does not just hold his hand so tightly that he
cannot move; he twists it behind Vinicius’ back. In the scene at the aque-
duct, which in this version takes place in full daylight, he rides into the
middle of the crowd on horseback (Plate 2.5; his tunic is pulled up to bare
his legs). Although he is not young, Boguslaw Linda’s Petronius is vigorous
and sexy and the film relies on his attractiveness to make him sympathetic:
it is full of close-ups of his face as he expresses either his pleasure in beauty
or controlled disdain at court. In this film, as in the novel, we first see
Nero through the eyes of Lygia (the camera makes this focalization clear).
Acte warns Vinicius that Caesar is watching him; we then see Nero looking
through the emerald and the camera cuts between Nero and Petronius as
Petronius works to convince Nero that he should not be sexually interested
in Lygia. For the first part of the film, as elsewhere, Petronius is the
filter for the court scenes. When Nero is first persuaded to accuse the
Christians, for example, the camera is close to Tigellinus and Nero, and
then we see Petronius watching them. Only after Petronius fails to convince
Nero that he should not wrongly blame the Christians for burning
Rome does Nero appear without him. Nero’s inner life is suggested primar-
ily by the Laocoon that decorates his reception room; his tormented soul
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is echoed by the statue glimpsed in the background. Yet the film is less interested in Nero than other versions; like the novel, it does not treat him as a center of interest.

This film tries to be faithful to the novel. Its most important cuts are the sections covered in the letters of Petronius; it uses little of the court intrigue other than Petronius’ efforts to help Vinicius and the Christians; and it drops Sienkiewicz’s instruction of Vinicius by Paul and Petronius’ discussions with the apostle. Sometimes, like the 1912 version, it becomes telegraphic. In the encounter between Poppaea and Lygia in the imperial gardens, for instance, the baby and her nurse are in the background and Lygia has no contact with her. Poppaea and Lygia look very much alike, and it is clear that her resentment of Lygia arises from fear that Nero will be interested in her. So the accusation that Lygia has bewitched the baby seems random, and Poppaea’s proposal to blame the fire on the Christians is poorly motivated since her sexual advances to Vinicius and his refusal have also been cut. In this version, the removal of her Judaizing also creates some narrative difficulty. During the discussion at court of how to appease the people after the fire, Tigellinus is summoned by Poppaea, and the two of them return to propose putting the blame on the Christians; after Petronius leaves, Chilo appears to denounce the Christian characters. The viewer
must infer that Chilo has prompted Poppaea but has no way of knowing how he has made contact with her.

Like the novel, the film uses varying focalizations, making frequent use of the subjective camera. Through most of the film, we see the Christians largely through Vinicius’ eyes. In the arena, the camera is among the Christians, occasionally looking briefly at the spectators and at Nero. The film gives special attention to Chilo. While in his scenes with Petronius and Vinicius we see him mostly from their perspective, the camera repeatedly follows him after he leaves meetings with them or with the Christians, showing him scuttling through the streets of Rome. This prepares us for the importance of Chilo in the latter part of the film. In the arena scenes, Chilo is the center of narrative tension since the film reproduces the novel’s episodes in which other courtiers mock his inability to tolerate the sight of bloody death. Petronius here, warning Chilo that he will not endure because “the gods made you a robber, but you have become a demon,” takes on a prophetic voice. Chilo is perhaps as important as Petronius in this film: it is not deeply interested in Petronius as a member of the imperial court, except as his success or failure in influencing Nero determines the fates of the lovers and of the Christians, but it is profoundly interested in the possibility of salvation for this initially contemptible character.

Seeing and Mapping Rome

Sienkiewicz provides a vivid sense of Rome as a place and each version seeks to outdo both the text and earlier versions in showing the city. The city itself is almost a character since the fire is so central to the plot. Yet in both novel and films, the actual devastation caused by the fire is relatively unimportant. No important character is seriously hurt in the fire. Petronius’ house is undamaged. Although Sienkiewicz refers to the crowds of people camped out in Nero’s gardens, he does not describe the work of clearing the ruins. In the films and the miniseries, too, the fire is a spectacle but, once it is over, it has no effect on the landscape. Only in the 1985 miniseries do the executions of the Christians take place in an arena obviously built for the occasion. When Nero, in the 1951 film, shows his plans for the rebuilding of Rome, the model he uses actually shows the Rome of
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Constantine, so that historical change vanishes. Where the films present the Christians’ martyrdom in the Coliseum (the Flavian amphitheater), the anachronism is unimportant in itself but it ignores the reality that the amphitheater was built later over the pond of Nero’s Golden House. Although Rome is burned, Rome in all the versions of Quo Vadis is very much the Eternal City.

The novel takes place mostly in the palace of Nero and the houses of aristocrats such as Petronius and Marcus Vinicius, or in the Subura and the Trans-Tiber region where the lower classes of society live. The inhabitants of the Trans-Tiber are mainly Christian or Jewish and the novel refers to synagogues on the right side of the river. This description corresponds to historical reality since, from the time of Augustus up to the third century, the Jewish community of the capital resided predominantly in Trastevere. Presumably by the end of the first century CE, community life also spread to the Subura and other neighborhoods located on the left side of the Tiber, where Jewish catacombs were established around that time. The Christian inhabitants of Rome lived, in the first century, close to the Jewish community. Trastevere is well attested as a center of Christian settlements, as is the area inside the city on the right and left of the Via Appia, between the Porta Capena and the Almone river.

The Via Appia is mentioned several times in the novel but never as a center of Christian activity. For example, it is on this road that Marcus returns to Rome after the stay in Antium interrupted by the fire. Peter flees the persecution on the Via Appia and has his vision of Christ there but the site of the apparition will not become a center of worship until long after the time of Nero. At the beginning of the novel, we learn that Marcus had injured his arm on the Appian Way, was found by Aulus Plautius and nursed in his house. But although his wife and Lygia are Christians, Aulus himself is, in the novel, a pagan, and there is no evidence that the house is a regular meeting place for Christians.

By focusing on the Palatine on the one hand and the Trans-Tiber region on the other, Sienkiewicz creates a dichotomy between these different worlds, with the river as a visual border. Vinicius’ awkward position between Nero’s court and the Christian community is mirrored by his regular excursions to the Trans-Tiber region where he suspects Lygia is hiding. The ill-reputed business quarter of the Subura seems to serve as a grey zone between these extremes. It is located on the left (“Palatine”) side of the river but is described in a way that resembles the Trans-Tiber region.
Sienkiewicz, in accordance with ancient sources such as Martial and Juvenal, describes it as a shabby yet busy neighborhood inhabited by small businessmen and dubious persons from the lower layers of society. It is not predominantly Christian or Jewish but Christians sometimes use it as a hideout. It is also the home of Chilo, who is neither an observant Jew nor a Christian nor a pagan, and who does not have a permanent social status (he rises from rags to riches and then meets a miserable end at the hands of Tigellinus). Dramatically, this intermediate zone helps to convey the impression that the Christians, while distinct from and in opposition to the ruling aristocracy, share the fate and living conditions of their poor pagan neighbors.

While the Palatine is characterized by its prominent location within the city and its lavish buildings, both the Subura and the Trans-Tiber region have narrow alleys, low and crowded, with mostly wooden houses. The contrast between the splendor of the Palatine and the wretched buildings of the Subura and the Trans-Tiber region is well attested in ancient sources. But it also corresponds to a dichotomy still visible in the nineteenth-century Rome that Sienkiewicz visited. The site of the Roman government had always been north of the Tiber, close to the ancient heart of the town. As long as he was also the secular ruler of Rome, the pope had his official residence on the Quirinal in a quarter where many palazzi of noble families were located along relatively large streets. After the unification of Italy in 1861, the new secular government took over the former papal government buildings while the pope himself retreated to the Vatican. St. Peter’s basilica was separated from the center of secular power by the borgo, a neighborhood characterized by tiny houses and narrow alleys. Surrounded by buildings, the huge square of St. Peter would not be visible from afar as it is today but would open up suddenly when the visitor emerged from one of the small streets. The Via della Conciliazione, the large boulevard connecting the two power centers of the city, had not yet been built.

None of the films, however, maps a distinction between the Christian living quarters and that of the Roman aristocracy. The Tiber does not mark a boundary. Instead, the differences are visible in their standard of living, especially their clothes, style of houses, and the interior of the rooms. The Rome of the 1912 version is not mapped at all. The camera conveys individual scenes with rich depth – the facade of Nero’s Renaissance-looking palace and the circus in which the chariot race takes place, for example (see Plate 2.3, Petronius addressing the people) – but, being stationary, it does not connect places with each other and there are no panoramic views.
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Petronius’ litter arrives at Nero’s door but he does not travel through a city that has an urban fabric. The 1925 version, in contrast, begins with a panoramic image of Rome that defines it as the center of the world and then makes Nero and his palace the center of Rome. This Rome is a city: the film, for example, shows Nero wandering through the streets when he visits a witch.

The 1912 and the 1925 films are alike in presenting a Rome full of trap doors, secret hallways, and meeting places. Especially in the 1925 film, Christians typically hold their meetings underground. During the great banquet in Nero’s lavish palace, the camera cuts between Nero’s revels and the Christian community praying at the same time in their underground church. When the Christians bring Lygia to a safe place in the basement of a run-down building, the room where she hides is full of toads and vermin.

In the intertitles of the 1925 film, references to these underground meeting places are used metaphorically to stress the danger the new sect poses to the city: When Petronius tells Nero that the Christians are “a handful of harmless fools, praying to a strange god in the catacombs beneath the city,” Tigellinus replies that they are “neither fools nor harmless! Day by day their number increases – until they threaten the very foundations of thy throne, O Caesar!” In the authoritative intertitle, the catacombs are then presented as a secret system of hallways “which stretched their tentacles beyond the confines of the city.” The tentacle metaphor focalizes from the point of view of those who fear Christians. While the catacombs’ extension beyond the city might be explained as a possible escape route (an edict against the Christians has just been promulgated), it also conveys the impression of a group whose general interests lie beyond Rome. These aspirations make them additionally suspicious.

When, near the end of the 1925 film, the emperor flees from the arena and tries to hide in his palace, the two imperial servants he asks for help turn out to be Christians who lead him to a trap door inside the palace which Nero himself does not know. Climbing down into a secret system of underground hallways, Nero suddenly encounters Ursus, Lygia and other Christians, who have apparently been hiding right under the Palatine. The former victims, it seems, have indeed infiltrated the center of power and contributed to Nero’s fall. The emperor manages to escape to the countryside but his fate is already sealed and he commits suicide shortly after. Both visually and through the intertitles, this Rome is mapped vertically: Nero’s Rome is bright and on the surface, the Christians’ hidden and dark.
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The Rome of the 1951 film is a clearly defined place within a larger landscape: near the very beginning of the film, we see it from a distance with Marcus: “There it is – Rome.” This Rome is not as sharply divided into areas of magnificence and of utter squalor as the 1925 version. The common people live in less magnificent houses than the aristocrats but their homes are not miserable hovels. Houses of the poor are generally simple but clean. Even the underground meeting place of the Christian community is not remotely as creepy and gloomy as the catacombs presented in the 1925 film. Instead, constructed open spaces are associated with terror: the immense (and unhistorical) open space where Vinicius has his triumph has strong fascist overtones and Nero’s panic flight through his own palace conveys his isolation through a high long shot of the man alone in a vast empty room.27 When Marcus uses the famous Roman sewers to lead people to safety during the fire, however, the level of urban development shows its positive side.

This presentation of Rome contrasts with Nero’s constant complaints about the unbearable atmosphere of the city. He whines about the stifling air in Rome, especially the “stench of pigs and oxen.” This motif is borrowed from the novel (where most courtiers, including Petronius, are disgusted by the “foul smell” of common people), and Sienkiewicz in turn got the idea from ancient sources such as Martial.28 But while the novel conveys the impression that the snobby remarks of the courtiers are not completely unfounded and that there is indeed an unpleasant smell in Rome’s poorer quarters, the 1951 film never shows a pig or other animal in the streets. Consequently, Nero’s unhappiness seems more like the affectation of an effeminate patrician than a real problem, especially since only Nero complains about the smell.

His disdain for the population takes its most threatening form when the emperor finally decides to replaces the old, “stifling” Rome with a new city that will be called Neropolis.29 Before he reveals the plan to his courtiers, Nero is seen discussing the project with his architect, employing a model of the city. His primary concern is the new imperial palace: when the reconstruction is completed, the imperial gardens will flourish where a public market had been and “no longer will the stench of pigs and oxen rise up the slopes of the Palatine.”

The conversation is then briefly interrupted by Acte, whom Nero, angered by her “staring” gaze, banishes “from Rome and from my sight.” Turning to the architect, he then complains that it is “disgusting when common bovine solicitude replaces the fire within a woman’s body.” The
metaphor of “bovine” behavior links Acte to the old Rome characterized by the stench of pig and oxen. It is therefore no surprise that Acte is banished at the very moment that Nero’s ideal of a new Rome is taking shape. Fire, as a desirable feature in a woman, is then transferred, on a real level, to the city: “But what pulsating purity there is in fire. My new Rome shall spring from the loins of fire.” The erotic relationship to a woman and the relationship to the city are thus blended.

Shortly after, Nero summons the rest of the court to explain his plans to them. His main fear is that Petronius will not approve “the methods” he feels compelled to use in creating his new Rome so he plans to promote the idea “with intelligence.” The result is a long speech about how the killings of his mother and wife were meant to open up a new world for him as the supreme artist: He feels that he “must exceed the stature of man in both good and evil” (there is obviously an allusion to Nietzsche, associated with Nazis in the popular imagination).30 He then unveils the model of the new Rome and announces that the city will be “the master gem of the world’s crown.” While all of the courtiers applaud his plans with shouts of “magnificent” and “hail divinity,” Petronius alone is confused and worried about the fate of the old Rome, “dirty and magnificent as it is, the Rome we love.”

At the same time, the 1951 film establishes a link to the recently defeated fascist and national socialist regimes by employing the original model of Rome created for Mussolini’s “Museo della Civiltà Romana.” This museum, a bombastic structure in Rome’s new EUR quarter, was a superb demonstration of the megalomaniac architecture Mussolini envisioned for the fascist state. Characterized by towering facades and broad streets, it was supposed to inspire awe and fear in the spectator. Similar attitudes prevailed in Nazi Germany where Hitler’s architects had planned a gigantic rebuilding of Berlin to be renamed “Welthauptstadt (’world capital’) Germania.”31 The connection to the fascist and Nazi regimes is facilitated by both modern dictators’ fascination with fire. Newsreel footage from Italy and Germany had repeatedly shown marches with torches and public celebrations held in the light of flickering flames.

The idea that Nero had Rome burnt because he wanted to reconstruct the city as a whole is unique to the 1951 film. In the novel and in the previous films, his primary interest had been his desire to see a burning city on which to model his Troy epic. The extension of the palace and the construction of the “Golden House,” on the other hand, were secondary effects. The new interpretation of Nero’s motives brings in its wake a reinvention of the fire itself. In historical reality, the fire broke out near the
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Circus Maximus, that is, in the city center and near the Palatine. Parts of the imperial palace, especially the so-called *domus transitoria*, were destroyed. According to Tacitus (*Ann. 15.40*), most of Rome’s 14 regions suffered from the fire, ranging from light damage to complete destruction. Among the four regions to be spared was the Trans-Tiber section where many Jews and Christians lived, protected by its location on the other side of the river (the novel describes the situation in accordance with Tacitus, *QV 48, 368*). In the 1951 film, however, Tigellinus proudly proclaims that all of Rome “is a sea of fire, it burns from rim to rim.” This includes, as he tells an anxious Vinicius, the Trans-Tiber region. Only the Palatine area is safe, “naturally.”

In this film, then, the main division within Rome is temporal. There are at least three Romes: Petronius’, which belongs to the past, Nero’s, which is an unfulfilled fantasy, and Peter’s, the true Rome of the future. After the arena scenes, Rome contracts around Nero as the camera follows his flight through his palace in long shot so that the building feels like a vast city in itself. The final scenes, where we see Galba’s army on the road outside the city, and Lygia, Vinicius, and Nazarius drive away, turns away from Rome altogether. The film begins with a view of Rome from afar and its conclusion is a journey to a wider world.

The 1985 miniseries offers an interesting mixture of realism and artistic distancing. The living conditions of the common people all bear the hallmarks of “reality”: they pursue their trades; they amuse themselves in their free time with street shows, and eat out in taverns. There is no place for an elaborate system of secret hallways and underground tunnels hewn in stone and used by Christians – Vinicius visits a dark and creepy oracle: it is pagan superstition that is underground. The Christian community, in contrast, often meets outside the city walls, on grassy fields on the roadside or in the shadow of trees. The miniseries thus maintains a certain degree of “visible” distance between the Christians and their pagan environment while at the same time suggesting that the group has nothing to hide. This shift is especially important because the Christians in the 1985 series are mostly immigrants in Rome. We will argue that they carry a contemporary subtext for an Italian audience witnessing the first waves of immigration from third-world countries.

While the common people are shown in a mostly realistic environment, Nero and the court live in a highly artificial and Fellinesque world. Excessive make-up for men, fantasy costumes, and a stylized way of moving and
gesturing are typical for this world. While these motifs are based on the novel, the miniseries emphasizes them more. For example, Sienkiewicz mentions in passing that in Nero’s entourage there are “children resembling Cupids, with wonderful faces” (QV 36, 287). In the series, two boys dressed up as Cupids are shown throughout a whole scene, fetching dice Nero throws to the floor.

Whereas the 1951 version employs a realistic miniature model of Rome to show the emperor’s plans for the new city, the 1985 series has Nero poring over an abstract set of black stones laid out on the floor of the palace. When Poppaea’s son Rufius reacts with confusion, Nero correctly observes that “it takes a little imagination” to figure out what the stones signify. The only detail clearly visible is the Tiber River but it is not a physical border between different quarters of the city as it had been in the novel. Throughout, Nero’s world often seems claustrophobic. The rooms of his palace are immense but he does not often appear outside them, while the Pisonians, for example, go through the city by night and meet on country properties.

The miniseries’ preference for abstract props and scenery is unhistorically deflating of the expected Roman grandeur. While other versions base their arenas on the Coliseum, in this film the makeshift arena even lacks seating, which the one Nero erected surely had. The night setting, with torchlight, further limits the range of vision. Resisting the temptation to be grandiose and to compete with the big screen by showing the opposite extreme of a primitive arena has therefore a sobering effect, even if it is primarily motivated by the grotesque style of Nero throughout the series. The miniseries stresses its distance from the conventions of the Roman spectacle and its allegiance to a different aesthetic.

The most lavish and most impressive settings, however, are found in the 2001 film. It is the only cinematic version that lays consistent emphasis on the contrast between the building materials used in poor neighborhoods (they are made from simple stone or wood and decorated with some rudimentary wall paintings) and that used in the public squares near the center of power (where everything is laid out in marble and the buildings often have columns of colored stone). The architecture in these public squares is generally spacious and impressive. The streets are implausibly clean everywhere. Rome had rarely been so colorful in toga films before (recently, the series Rome, produced by HBO – a co-producer of the 2001 Quo Vadis – has adopted a similar style and earned much praise for it) and it seems to
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derive from a new awareness that Roman temples and statues were painted. The film's attention to historical details can be seen, among other things, from the reconstruction of a tavern (where Chilo gathers intelligence) featuring the characteristic countertops with holes for food containers familiar, for example, from Pompeii and Herculaneum. The 1925 version, on the other hand, puts the same scene in an environment that could easily be medieval or early modern.

Similarly, ancient works of art and wall paintings from Pompeii serve as models for the wall decorations in the film (the frescoes of the Villa of Mysteries are seen in Petronius’ atrium and Nero has a copy of the Laocoon in his palace). Where such elaborate decorations could not be expected (as in the house of the simple worker Glaucus, for example), at least characteristic Pompeian colors are employed (mainly red and a brownish yellow).

The most striking feature of the film’s scenery however, is an all-pervasive Mediterranean light (the film was shot in Tunisia and in France) which underlines the many colors dominating the sets and props of the film. It is the only version, for example, that shows Antium as a true Mediterranean seaside resort, including stunning views of the shore and the water. The quiet and relaxed atmosphere (the courtiers are seen on a porch overlooking the sea, enjoying the sun and the breeze while Nero rehearses his songs) helps to stress the contrast between the blissful existence of the court and the desperation of the people trapped in the smoke-filled streets of burning Rome.

The emphasis on southern nature and landscape is reinforced by an abundance of flowers. In Petronius’ conversation with Marcus in which he declares that “once I loved the odor of verbenas; but as Eunice prefers violets, I like them now beyond all other flowers” (QV 29, 243), the film actually has Petronius take a handful of violets and strew them about. Flowers are also in abundance at the imperial banquet, and the gardens in which Lygia and Marcus meet are in full blossom (see Plate 2.6; this is a point-of-view shot as Vinicius, Petronius, Pomponia, and Aulus look at Lygia, who has just entered from the right to retrieve the ball in her hand).

The film’s extreme prettiness reflects the paintings of Alma-Tadema, which are full of flowers. The emphasis on the abundance of nature reflects the northern European romantic desire for Mediterranean landscapes. This enthusiasm for Italy, most prominently expressed by Byron and Goethe, was also widespread in Poland where the works of both authors were translated by Mickiewicz. Sienkiewicz shared their views about Italy. Shortly
before his departure for the Riviera in December 1895, he wrote to Jadwiga Janczewska: “every man has two fatherlands: His own and Italy, from the point of view of science, art and culture [. . .]. That’s how it is.” In an essay about the poet Maria Konopnicka, he comments on her stay on the Riviera: “this land full of sunshine is sweet to her.”34 With its stunning landscapes, its Mediterranean light and abundance of flowers, the 2001 film highlights the romantic longing shared by Poland and the western countries. Even in matters of taste, Poland is closer to the western tradition than to eastern countries.

Each film, then, is a slightly different story set in a slightly different Rome. All attempt to convey ancient Roman power by displaying grandiose monuments but the effects of these monuments depend on the narrative context and the visual surrounding. Because so much of the novel is filtered through Petronius, he is crucial to the mood of any adaptation. In the 1912 and the 1925 version, the sympathetic Christians appear to exist in a dark underground world. In the 1985 miniseries, they are both fully part of the multiethnic mix of the lively cityscape and outside it, meeting outside the walls. The Rome of the 1951 version is intimidating, that of the 2001 appealing. Both the mise-en-scène and the narrative organization reflect strictly cinematic concerns alongside ideological pressures.
Notes

1 Chatman 1986.
2 "Ocularization" is the term introduced by Jost 1983; see Jost 2004.
3 Desmond and Hawkes (2006: 43–4) divides adaptations into “close,” “intermediate,” and “loose” (Cahir calls them “literal,” “traditional,” and “radical”). These are not evaluative terms.
4 Diederichs 1986: 68.
6 Library of Congress control number unk83057927 (no date or publication information).
7 For this practice, see Elliott 2003: 16–17.
8 Josephus calls her “god-fearing” (θεοφοβήτης) at Ant. 20.8. when he describes how he came to Rome to intercede on behalf of some priests who had been arrested by the procurator. Introduced to Poppaea by the actor of Jewish origin, Aliturus (a character in the 1985 version), he was successful through her help. Recent scholarship does not see “god-fearing” as a technical term; Poppaea was sympathetic to Jews but that is all that can be said (Smallwood 1959; Williams 1988).
10 Courtney 2001: 511 (“a reasonable hypothesis”).
11 Bentley 1937.
12 Kittstein 2005: 93.
13 See Babington and Evans 1993: 190.
14 In the video available from Silent Screen Classics, the shot of Petronius’ arrival at Nero’s palace is misplaced, so that it appears to be the arrival of Petronius and Vinicius at Aulus’ house. In the French 1923 re-release at the BFI, it is the opening shot, in correct sequence.
15 This is a form of POV shot set-up 2 in the classification of Branigan 1984: 110. Because the subject is in the frame with the object, the point of view can be defined in a single shot.
16 Shifting between past and present tense in the expository intertitles continues throughout the film, which thus seems to seek both historical authority and immediacy. See Bordwell 2004: 210–11. In the 1912 film, intertitles are in the present until the last: “So Nero died, consumed as if by fire. There was mourning and the sadness of death. But out of the tears and the blood came a new life. Christianity, symbol of love and peace.” This clearly moves the viewer out of the immediacy of the story-present to claim historical authority.
17 Evidently, star power has arrived between 1912 and 1925. For the transition from anonymous actors to movie stars, see Sinyard 1990: 72–3.
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18 This is based on the famous story of Vedius Pollio who, while entertaining Augustus, ordered a slave who had broken a crystal cup thrown into a fish-pond stocked with eels. The slave begged Augustus for mercy and, when Pollio did not quickly concede, Augustus broke all his valuable cups. Pliny, 9.77; Seneca, de ira, 3.40; de clementia, 1.18; Tertullian, De Pallio, 5.6

19 Jannings’ Nero surely contributed to Charles Laughton’s Nero in The Sign of the Cross (dir. C. B. deMille, 1932) and so to the continuing tradition of the cinematic evil emperor.

20 Sienkiewicz’s Petronius comments sarcastically on Pomponia’s endless mourning (QV 1, 10) but on his visit is impressed by the “serenity” of the household (QV 2, 24).

21 Lanz 1986: 197.

22 Literary evidence comes from Philo who reports that, by the time of Augustus, most Jews (who had been brought to Rome as slaves by Pompeius) were emancipated Roman citizens and lived on the other side of the Tiber (Philo, Leg. Ad Gaium 155, 157).

23 See Smallwood 1981: 131. Jewish presence in the Subura is also attested by inscriptive sources such as CIG 6447 and CIJ 1: 18; 22, 67, 140, 380, and from an amphora found in the same quarter stamped with a menorah (CIL 15:3552,1).


25 Pomponia Graecina is said to be afraid to raise her son Aulus as a Christian and she seems convinced that her husband will never convert to the new faith (QV 4, 29).

26 Sienkiewicz speaks, for example, of “disgusting and terrible figures lurking about suspected houses in the Subura or in the Trans-Tiber” (QV 17, 110). Juvenal calls the Subura fervens (“buzzing,” sat. 11.51); Martial, quoting Juvenal, talks of the clamosa (“vociferous,” “noisy”) suburra, Mart. 12.18. For the reputation of its inhabitants see, for example, Martial 6.66, describing a herald who tries in vain to sell “a girl of not too good a reputation, of the kind who sit around in the middle of the Subura.”


28 In the novel, Nero laments: “I am stifled in these narrow streets, amid these tumble-down houses, amid these alleys. Foul air flies even here to my house and my gardens” (QV 30, 196). This complaint appears almost literally in the 1951 film where Nero whines: “this heat of Rome oppresses me, it stifles me [ . . . ] the foul breath of that mob floats in my house, in my gardens!” Foul breath is the main point in Martial’s epigram on a certain Fescennia (Mart. 1.87).

29 This detail goes back to Tacitus (Ann. 15.40.2) who reports that the fire, after having been quelled, broke out again on the estate of Tigellinus, and that it
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 seemed that Nero was looking for glory by founding a new city to be called by his own cognomen.

31 See Reichhardt and Schäche 1998. Plans for the reconstruction of Berlin took inspiration from ancient cities, for example the planning of the principal streets and of the “Hall of Fame” devised after the Pantheon in Rome. See Scobie 1990. Wyke (1997: 140) discusses the model.
32 In the 1925 film, the Trans-Tiber region is apparently threatened (and possibly damaged) by the fire but it is unclear how much destruction there is. A messenger simply tells Nero that “the Circus Maximus is burning – the fire is sweeping across the Tiber!”
34 Both passages quoted in Biliński 1973: 37.
3

Gender and Ethnicity

Marcus and Lygia

Sienkiewicz’s novel is conventional and very much of its time in its presentation of gender and the films largely depend on the stereotypes it presents: the hyper-aggressive, tough male transformed by romantic love, the strong but simple-minded giant, the shy and pure young girl, the evil, sexually aggressive empress. Yet the 1925 version already innovates in ways that complicate its presentation of gender and this becomes a significant issue in the film of 1951. Although it continues to depend on stereotypes, it combines conventional roles and stereotypes with a new emphasis on women’s strength and independent moral agency. In the 1985 version, issues of both gender and ethnicity are raised self-consciously, complementing this version’s overt political themes. Gender roles become more fluid.

In the 1985 version, furthermore, for the first time the romance between Lygia and Marcus becomes a crossing of boundaries, not only of religion but of culture. Although the novel’s plot depends on the foreignness of Lygia, and the “Polish” origins of Lygia and Ursus are important to the political intertext, actual cultural difference is unimportant in it. Much of the novel’s attitude towards the barbarians is highly indebted to the Tacitean distinction between “vigorous” barbarians versus decadent Roman society. Tacitus’ *Germania* ascribes many formerly “Roman” virtues to the Germanic tribes beyond the northern border which had, in his view, not yet been affected and weakened by the depravity of contemporary Rome. By drawing the same distinction in his novel and substituting the proto-Polish Lygians for the German tribes described by Tacitus, Sienkiewicz indirectly suggested the equality (or even superiority) of the oppressed...
Poles to the occupying forces of Prussia and Austria. Ursus declares to Vinicius, somewhat surprisingly in the context of the novel, that the Lygians “are virtuous people though pagan” (QV 26, 213).

In the novel, Lygia’s love transforms the aggressive Marcus Vinicius and persuades him to convert (a stock motif from previous novels about early Christianity that typically involve a romance between a Christian and a pagan).¹ Lygia is a loving and obedient daughter who does not resist when her foster parents tell her to follow the imperial order and continue her life at the imperial court. And although she knows that she prefers the Christian way of life to anything the pagan world could offer, only rarely does she proclaim her views openly or take actions of her own. Usually, she conveys her wishes to Ursus who, although not a slave, was a subject of her father and is therefore her social inferior. Occasionally, she corrects her lover Marcus Vinicius on topics that touch upon religion. Typically, however, she is passive. When she is in terrible doubt about her love for Marcus, she first reveals her feelings to Crispus and then kneels before Peter; it is Crispus who explains the situation to Peter. Lygia does not even speak while Peter and Paul rebuke Crispus for his rigor.

In the novel, Pomponia Graecina is a faithful Christian wife and no more.² Yet according to Tacitus (Ann. 13.32), Pomponia Graecina had very distinct political opinions: After Julia, the daughter of Drusus, was killed by Messalina, Pomponia wore mourning for the rest of her life, displaying constant sadness to protest about the killing. Dissent of this kind could be dangerous and Tacitus emphasizes that Pomponia was not punished by the emperor Claudius for her opposition.³ In Sienkiewicz’s novel, Petronius briefly mentions Pomponia’s constant sadness, assuming that her somber appearance is a result of her Christianity (QV 40, 312 [in a discussion with Marcus Vinicius]: “I wonder […] , that in spite of a religion described by thee as a sea of happiness, and in spite of a love which is soon to be crowned, sadness has not left thy face. Pomponia Graecina is eternally pensive; from the time of thy becoming a Christian thou hast ceased to laugh.”). She wears “dark robes” (QV 2, 24) but there is no allusion to the political motive of Pomponia’s behavior.

The non-Christian women of the novel too excel mainly through their loyalty and devotion. The slave girl Eunice adores Petronius to the point of self-abasement (and finally succeeds in winning his love). The royal courtesan Acte, although long since dismissed by Nero, is among the few faithful to bury the emperor.⁴ In both the novel and the films, men’s characters develop, while women’s usually do not. Marcus, for example, is shown in
the 1912 and 1951 version as initially tough, rude, jealous, and sexually aggressive but these qualities do not diminish his status as a positive hero: His love for Lygia transforms him and turns his negative characteristics into positive qualities such as emotional commitment, courage, and outspokenness. When Poppaea is shown with similar characteristics (she too is recklessly jealous and, in the 1912 and 1951 versions, sexually aggressive), these traits mark her as evil, since there is no prospect for a change in her character, and the double standard means that they are more harshly judged in women. And while Marcus first tries to control Lygia out of a desperate passion for her, Poppaea is dominated by a hunger for power that does not have any inherent positive values.

**Petronius and Eunice**

In many ways, the novel presents the love between Petronius and his slave girl Eunice as a foil for the relationship of Marcus and Lygia. In both cases, a noble Roman falls in love with a young foreign girl (Eunice is introduced as a Greek, QV 1, 12) and both are, to some degree, transformed by the experience. But while in the case of Marcus and Lygia, it is the male partner who tries in vain for some time to win a woman’s love, in the other it is the female slave who is desperately but silently in love with her master. In both cases, too, the desiring partner is tormented by the presence of a “rival”: Marcus is anxious that Lygia’s love for Christ might leave no room for him, and Eunice has to endure the rivalry of Chrysothemis, Petronius’ mistress at the beginning of the novel. Furthermore, both relationships begin in an atmosphere of violence: in the world of the novel, brutal force against slaves and other social inferiors is a distinctive feature of pagan Roman behavior.

In the novel, the reader is told early on that Eunice is secretly in love with Petronius, but has so far not attracted his attention (QV 1, 12). A conflict between the two arises after Lygia’s flight when Petronius tries to comfort the lovesick Vinicius by offering him Eunice as a substitute. Eunice objects desperately and Petronius has her given twenty-five lashes by the atrium overseer, Tiresias (QV 12, 107). In describing the dialogue between Petronius and Eunice, Sienkiewicz goes to great lengths in assuring the reader that Petronius was not cruel: “He was too refined to be cruel. His slaves [. . .] were freer than others, on condition of performing their service.
in an exemplary manner [...]. In case they failed [...] he was able not to spare punishment, to which, according to general custom, they were subject” (QV 12, 107). The stress on the “general custom” exonerates Petronius from any accusations of personal abusiveness and qualifies his behavior towards Eunice as average in Roman society. Shortly before, he left Vinicius’ house in disgust after Vinicius had given orders to punish savagely all the slaves who let Lygia escape in a Christian ambush (QV 10, 90). He himself, on the other hand, orders Tiresias not to break Eunice’s skin so that her beauty might not be diminished.

Only when Petronius meets Eunice again in the service corridor some time afterwards does the relationship become more personal. Confused to see her still in the house although he had initially planned to give her to Vinicius, and unable to find Tiresias for information, he approaches the girl directly, inquiring if she had received the strokes. Eunice confirms it, throwing herself at his feet “with joy and gratitude” in her voice (QV 12,108): she is convinced that she will now be allowed to stay in the household. Petronius, realizing that only love for somebody in his house could be the reason for her strange behavior, asks her in vain about her lover. Then, looking down on her, he suddenly really sees her: “with those eyes, with that golden hair thrown back, with fear and hope in her face, she was so beautiful, she looked at him so entreatingly, that Petronius [...], who, as a man of aesthetic nature, had given homage to all beauty, felt for her a certain species of compassion” (QV 12, 108).

He then asks Tiresias, who tells him that she has no lover. When she reports Chilo’s prediction that she would experience both pain and joy, and Petronius comments that she has experienced the pain already, she tells him that she has also felt the joy: “‘I remain,’ said she in a whisper” (QV 13, 111). Petronius then puts his hand on her head and praises her folding of his toga, making her eyes well up and her breast heave.

The empress Poppaea is the only major female character in the novel who is evil, and the novel repeatedly contrasts her beauty with her wickedness (QV 7, 64–5; 9, 83–4). But she, too, is focused on her role as a wife. Having achieved her influential status at court through her beauty and recklessness, she remains wary of every beautiful woman as a potential threat. Suspecting that Lygia has attracted Nero’s attention during the banquet at the palace (QV 9, 83), she hates her because she is jealous. When her daughter by Nero falls sick and dies shortly afterwards, Poppaea is easily convinced by the frightened nurse that Lygia bewitched the child when she met them in the imperial gardens. Chilo later repeats this accusation and
connects it to the blood libel against the Christians. In his appearance before Nero, the philosopher declares that he had heard Lygia boasting “that though unable to bring the blood of an infant, she brought the death of an infant, for she bewitched the little Augusta” (QV 49, 378). Since Poppaea (and Tigellinus, the commander of the praetorian guard) have obviously hired Chilo as a false witness against the Christian community (QV 49, 376), the reader infers that Poppaea herself, ruthlessly counting on its emotional effect on an emperor still reeling from the loss of his only child, has prompted Chilo’s accusation. Poppaea’s strategic alliance with Tigellinus (who fears for his own life), shows her skill at court intrigue. In her peculiar way, she is the only woman in the novel to have political ambitions which are, however, closely linked to her ability to seduce and manipulate men.

All the women are defined exclusively by their relationship to religion and to men. Lygia and Pomponia Graecina are devout Christians whose religiosity shapes their relationships with their partners. Acte, although not a Christian herself, knows Christian teachings and is influenced by them (QV 7, 53). Eunice shows a quasi-religious veneration for Petronius. Poppaea has “held the faith of Jehovah” for years (QV 48, 369) and consults with rabbis, using them for her own political plans. Men have other concerns: politics, war, literature. Among men, only the Christians define themselves by religion.

While religion obviously divides the characters, ethnicity also matters. Lygia’s and Ursus’ Polish origin is important for the novel’s political subtext. Ursus speaks at some length to Vinicius about the region’s primeval forests, which Polish literature had made an important constituent of national identity, and about the native virtue of the Lygian people, even though they are heathens (QV 26, 213). Ursus’ battle in the arena against the bull famously symbolizes the nation’s struggle against oppression. Lygia’s status as a foreign hostage is crucial to the plot since it exposes her to Nero’s intervention. Yet this ethnic difference has no significant cultural component. Culturally, Lygia is entirely Roman.

The silent films for the most part further develop Sienkiewicz’s stereotypes of gender and they completely ignore issues of ethnicity. Indeed, an early intertitle in some versions of Guazzoni’s 1912 film calls Lygia a “Greek princess,” so that she remains foreign for the sake of the plot but belongs culturally and ethnically to the Mediterranean.

Both silent versions develop Eunice’s relationship with Petronius. In the 1912 film, Petronius’ order to have Eunice beaten and his later encounter
with her form a single scene. While in the novel he approaches her only because he is unsure whether he had given orders to take her to Vinicius’ house, he now asks her if she had “been punished enough,” replacing an objective inquiry with a humiliating rhetorical question. Eunice confirms that she has, kissing the hem of his toga. In the same version, Petronius carries a short stick, resembling a shorter version of the walking sticks popular for dandies at the turn of the century, and gestures with it in a way that suggests he might beat her again.

In the 1925 film, the topic is taken even further. The originally short and marginal event is drawn out into three climactic scenes (Eunice’s refusal, the arrival of the atrium overseer, and the punishment), interrupted by events from other plot lines. Unlike in the earlier versions, where Petronius quickly forgets about Eunice as soon as she has left the room with Tiresias, here he secretly watches her whipping, shown as a shadowy image on the wall. Afterwards, he approaches Eunice, who is sliding to the ground at the foot of the column on which she had been leaning, and gently lifts her up. They then kiss each other on the mouth.

While the novel attributes Petronius’ sudden fondness for Eunice to her beauty, which strikes him while he discusses her enigmatic “lover,” the Petronius of the 1925 film apparently falls in love with Eunice while watching her being beaten. Thus, Petronius’ and Eunice’s love affair acquires an open sado-masochistic touch. Since this aspect is not necessary for the plot and is not self-consciously addressed, its main function seems to be to titillate the spectator. As in other instances of gore, orgies and sex, the alleged historical “realism” of such scenes allows the viewer to enjoy “forbidden” topics without feeling guilty about it.

Similarly, the 1912 and the 1925 films emphasize Lygia’s helplessness. Several times, she is lifted up by Ursus or Vinicius and carried away without taking an active part in her rescue or offering successful resistance to Vinicius’ aggressiveness. In crisis situations, she often seems on the verge of fainting. At the palace, it is Acte who helps her to find her way around and it is Ursus who organizes her escape from Petronius’ litter. In the 1912 version, he also watches over her during the imperial banquet and carries her off to Acte when Marcus repeatedly tries to kiss and embrace her against her will.

The only instance in which she offers significant resistance to a powerful person is the ominous encounter with Nero in her hideout in Rome, found only in the Amsterdam version of the 1925 film but not in the novel or in any other film. When Nero offers her all the riches of the world and prom-
ises to make her empress, she firmly rejects him, declaring that the strength to do so is given her by “the God to whom I pray, the one true God.” Shortly afterwards, Ursus and some fellow Christians arrive and bring Lygia to safety. The dialogue with Nero is modeled on the temptation of Jesus in the desert (Mt. 4:1–11) and has obviously been introduced to emphasize that Nero is “satanic” (see p. 174). Finding herself directly confronted with a person she must perceive as diabolic, the faithful Lygia opposes him with all her strength. In this film, Nero abuses women, yet also fears them: he has nightmares about his murdered mother, and Poppaea is able to stop his attempted rape of Lygia simply by appearing. Women, even the evil empress, are the guardians of domestic virtue.

Pomponia

None of the films goes beyond the novel to Tacitus in order to depict Pomponia’s silent political protest. Instead, Pomponia is a happy person, living a virtuous, quiet life as a wife, mother, and respected noblewoman. Only the 1912 and the 1925 versions show her (and Aulus Plautius) wearing black but there is no hint of a political background. Since dark clothes were common among elderly and respectable people in most of Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, her way of dressing reflects, for the contemporary spectator, her age and social status rather than her personal view on life. Lygia and the young Aulus, on the other hand, wear light colors, stressing their youthful innocence. In the 2001 film, Pomponia wears a black robe over a white dress but again her clothing does not suggest mourning. The two other versions costume Pomponia in white or pastel dresses that contrast with the luxurious, gaudy garments worn at the imperial court. Though they are simple, none of them is a mourner’s dress and there is no sign of distress in Pomponia’s behavior until Lygia is taken to the imperial court by order of Nero. In the 1985 version, Petronius notes in a voice-over that Pomponia has an aura of “serene solitude” that he finds mysterious and attractive. In this scene, Pomponia wears snow-white garments and has a melancholic but certainly not mournful look.

In this version, Pomponia becomes politically involved, but only when Tigellinus and other officials force Aulus Plautius to put her on trial for superstition (the violation of Roman religious norms) because she is never seen in the temples worshiping the gods of the Roman state. Tacitus records
this incident: “Pomponia Graecina, an excellent woman, the wife of Aulus Plautius, was accused of adhering to a foreign superstition. She was handed over to the judgment of her husband. In accordance with ancient custom, he held a trial for her life and reputation in the presence of the relatives, and acquitted her” (Ann. 13.32). Since Romans saw proper religious practice as essential to the well-being of the state, religious behavior was political but Tacitus does not hint that Pomponia’s religious practices, whatever they were, had any political purpose, or that the accusation against her had any hidden motive. In the 1985 miniseries, however, Tigellinus instigates the trial of Pomponia, and the accusation aims at harming her husband. Pomponia, however, is not interested in politics. She is simply a devout and loyal Christian. Similarly, in the 2001 film Pomponia affirms her belief that the world is ruled by God, not by Nero (from QV 2, 29). Again, her statement is an expression of religious, not political beliefs, and there is never a hint that she has access to or is interested in the court politics that appear to have haunted the historical Pomponia Graecina.

It is in an extension of this role that in the 1925 film Pomponia Graecina, for a brief moment, steps out of her role as a quiet matrona and housewife. When the Christians are executed in the arena, the spectacle includes a chariot race in which the victims are dragged in the wake of the chariots. A chariot race is not found in the novel but the 1912 version of Nero’s games includes a brief racing sequence. It is not linked to the Christians, however, and appears only as a part of the series of attractions offered by Nero. The introduction of a chariot race is probably inspired by the dramatic chariot race of Ben-Hur which had been made into a film in 1907; another film version was released in the same year as this Quo Vadis (1925). In this 1925 race, Pomponia Graecina is among the victims, dragged behind one of the chariots for several rounds as her little son watches in horror. His desperate cries (“Mother! Mother!”) are taken up by a woman spectator who points out to her neighbor “She is a mother!” At this moment, Pomponia miraculously manages to free her tied hands while the race is in full swing and to climb onto the chariot. She pushes the surprised charioteer off the car and drives the quadriga to victory, greeted by the frenetic applause of the spectators. She leaps off the chariot apparently unscathed, and little Aulus runs up to her. Mother and son then hug each other as the crowd watches approvingly.

The film links Pomponia’s sudden heroism to her role as a mother. While she had been desperate and helpless when first tied to the chariot, the change occurs after Aulus and the spectators have emphasized her
motherhood. The notion that mothers can gain “superhuman” strength when defending their children has, of course, a long history. But the miraculous way in which Pomponia frees herself and, without training, outdoes the skills of professional charioteers is a peculiar development of this idea. So it is worth considering that the cult of motherhood was on the rise in fascist Italy, where the film was produced. Official politics could rely on a tradition going back to national unification, and developed further in World War I, that placed the Italian “mamma” at the heart of the household and attributed strength, courage, and guidance to her. While this role was traditionally confined to family life, excluding public activities other than those connected to the church and charity, fascists promoted women’s identification with the new state. They did so not by encouraging women to participate actively in the political life of the country but by portraying their traditional family role in terms of a heroic and highly political service to the state. The National Fascist Party goals, published in 1929, state that it is a woman’s duty “to serve the fatherland as the greatest Mother, the Mother of all good Italians.” The same attitude is mirrored by the military metaphors employed by Mussolini and other fascist leaders to describe women’s new roles. In 1934, when women demanded membership in an air club in Bologna, Mussolini wired the prefect of Bologna to express his disapproval, stating that “in fascist Italy, the most fascist thing Italian women can do is pilot many children” (De Grazia 1992: 76). On March 7, 1936, Mussolini proudly proclaimed that Italian women had made “every Italian family a fortress of resistance.”

In the film, both the crucial comment “she is a mother” and the resounding applause greeting victorious Pomponia are given not by fellow Christians but by the pagan spectators who came to see her die. The scene suggests that being a heroic mother is a quality that elicits spontaneous praise even from enemies and is, therefore, a universally respected and desirable quality.

Gender Roles in Public and Private Life

The 1951 film generally endorses a separation between the sphere of politics, which belongs to men, and the private life of the household, dominated by women. While this is mostly in line with the novel, the sexual politics of American popular culture were more complex than
those of Sienkiewicz’s book. The screwball comedies of the 30s and early
40s often feature clever, strong women, and it imagines marriage as a union
of equals.\textsuperscript{20} The series of Spencer Tracy–Katherine Hepburn films, whose
energy depends on self-conscious skirmishes over gender and power,
begins with \textit{Woman of the Year} in 1942 and extends to \textit{Desk Set} in 1957.\textsuperscript{21}
Further, during the war years, women had taken up positions formerly
occupied by men, and large government campaigns had encouraged them
to do so to make up for the shortage of male workers, especially in war
industries (“Rosie the Riveter,” who symbolized the female workforce, is
still a familiar icon in American popular culture. The topic was covered by
Connie Field’s 1980 documentary \textit{The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter}).
After the war, however, these women workers had to be persuaded to make
room for veterans, dedicating themselves again to family life. In the late
forties and fifties, as large numbers of veterans returned from war and had
to be integrated into the job market, American society re-established
conventional gender roles. Marriage and the birthrate soared after the war.
But since women had in fact proven that they were able to work outside
the home, boosting their self-confidence and earning the respect of men,
the image of the housewife could not be exactly the same as it had been
before the war years.\textsuperscript{22} So it is not surprising that compared to the earlier
versions, Pomponia, even though she does not aspire to any position outside
her family and household, assumes a more self-confident and active role,
and men respect her.

In the 1951 version, both Aulus and Pomponia are devout Christians
united by mutual love and respect. They fulfill, however, different roles
within the household and in its dealings with the outside world. Pomponia
speaks up mostly on occasions that concern her family directly. She talks
to the centurion who comes to escort Lygia to the imperial palace and
insists that Lygia is not a slave who can simply be taken away. When Aulus
is anxious over Lygia’s disappearance after the banquet at the court, she
suggests that he take a rest, reassuring him that she will call him should
news of Lygia arrive. Shortly afterwards, Marcus Vinicius arrives to inquire
about Lygia’s whereabouts. This time, both Aulus and Pomponia are present
but only Aulus does the talking. He insists on his honor as a Roman officer
that they do not know where Lygia is and accuses Marcus of having violated
their hospitality. When Marcus claims that Aulus has in turn overlooked
the laws of hostages according to which Lygia had been assigned to him as
his property, Aulus starts to denounce the Roman state in general and
Nero’s lifestyle in particular, claiming that it will soon lead to Rome’s
downfall. It is at this point that Pomponia steps in and tries to calm Aulus. She then hurries after Marcus, who is about to leave, and implores him:

Marcus! My dear young Marcus! I want to call you that, because for all of your rank, you could be my son. A woman of my years is not unaware of things. Lygia's eyes were drawn to you. I saw that. And they would not have been if deep down inside of you you were this cold, this relentless. Look in your heart, Marcus, and recognize the truth of you that should be.

While the former general's thoughts were focused on the future of the Roman state (which he considers in danger because of the moral depravity of Nero and his court), Pomponia argues personally: She addresses Marcus like a son, reminds him of her experience in life, and urges him to find his better self. Aulus' and Pomponia's behavior towards Marcus is, in a way, complementary. While Aulus addresses Marcus on the level of his professional life (both are military men and have a lively interest in politics), Pomponia appeals to him as a human being.

Lygia, on the other hand, is treated by the non-Christian men of the film as an object to be manipulated. Marcus Vinicius first mistakes her for a slave and talks about her as a “dove,” while Petronius and Nero discuss her physical attributes in front of her. But despite their often demeaning behavior, Lygia is more self-confident than in the silent films. Deborah Kerr was born in 1921 – she is no teenager, and does not try to look like one. The most important innovation in her character is a sense of irony which she cleverly uses to reproach Marcus Vinicius. Already during her first meeting at the house of her stepparents, she tells him that yes, she is “at the service of this household,” pretending not to realize that Marcus Vinicius is mistaking her for a slave. When he concludes that “the old general must know a good slave-market,” she answers with an ironic smile that “the old general, as you call him – well, I have the honor and the joy to be his daughter.” She thereby forces Marcus to ask forgiveness, even without protesting directly.

She becomes more direct when Marcus insists that she tell him what she does not like about him. Admitting that she is in fact attracted by his looks, she nevertheless tells him that “it’s what I hear I don’t like.” When Marcus wishes she was a slave so he could legally possess her, she barely hides her anger: “What a way for a conqueror to win a woman: To buy her like an unresisting beast. What false security you must have [. . .] in your manhood.” Later on, during the banquet of Nero she is forced to attend, she again objects to his arrogance. When he triumphantly tells her that she is now
his slave and he can do with her as he pleases, she agrees: “one command, one small empty command.” Such an attitude is foreign to the earlier cinematic versions and it cannot be found in the novel. In Sienkiewicz’s account of the banquet, for example, Lygia remains mostly silent during Marcus’ first attempts to make conversation, and when she finally speaks she asks him to let her go (QV 7, 60). Finally, during the closing moments of the banquet that serve as a model for Marcus’ rude behavior in the banquet of the 1951 film, Lygia is far from telling him self-confidently that his orders to her would be “empty” and therefore worthless. Again, she only implores him to let her go and experiences helplessness and anguish:

But in vain did she struggle with both hands to remove his hairless arm; in vain, with a voice in which terror and grief were quivering, did she implore him not to be what he was, and to have pity on her [. . .]. But her strength deserted her more and more. In vain did she bend and turn away her face to escape his kisses. (QV 7, 71)

In the novel and the 1912 version she is rescued by Ursus; in the 1925 film, Petronius sends a message to Poppaea. In the 1951 film, Poppaea notices Lygia’s resistance to Marcus and it piques her interest further; she summons him and informs him that she would be more cooperative.

Compared to the earlier versions, the 1951 version creates a relatively strong Lygia who compensates for her outer helplessness with wit and self-confidence. While she is unable to oppose Marcus by force or any lawful procedure (just as in the novel, she is granted to him by imperial decree and has no legal way to resist Nero’s order), she finds other, subtle ways of achieving small victories over him. Her witty way of manipulating him while remaining outwardly ingenuous helps to win his admiration and increase her attraction for him. Although she never puts into question the dominance of the man in public and political life, she indirectly manages to get her way and has more self-control and wisdom than he. She is also willing to flirt with him. Sienkiewicz’s character does not herself recognize her initial attraction to Marcus as what it is; Deborah Kerr’s Lygia openly acknowledges it.

In the novel, one of the few hints of Lygia’s wit and intelligence appears in the brief encounter between her and Petronius in the gardens of Aulus Plautius. When Petronius greets her with Odysseus’ address to Nausicaa (Hom. Odyssey 6.149–55), she answers with the matching quotation, taking Nero’s judge of taste by surprise. Petronius thinks it extraordinary to hear
Homer’s verses from “a maiden of whose barbarian extraction he had heard previously from Vinicius” (QV 2, 24–5). It then turns out that Lygia did not receive Greek instruction herself, but picked up Homer by listening to the classes of her stepbrother Aulus, which emphasizes her quickness of mind. No such literary erudition is found in the 1951 version, where it is Marcus who addresses Lygia with a flowery greeting: “Behold, she stands with her gown hung loose. Framed is her face in golden tresses, reflecting the milk white beauty of her shoulders. So it was that Venus stood before Mars, welcoming her lover. Nothing do I see that is not perfection.” The text is inspired by Ovid, am. 1.5.9–12 and 1.5.23: “Behold, Corinna comes, veiled in a loose tunic, her hair partitioned and covering her snow-white neck. So it was, as they say, that beautiful Semiramis went to her chambers, and Lais, loved by many men. […] Nothing did I see that was not praiseworthy.” For the more obscure Semiramis (a fabulous queen of the East) and Lais (a courtesan), whom the broad audience is not likely to identify, the screenwriters substituted the well-known Mars and Venus, stressing the military background of Marcus and the beauty of Lygia. At the same time, they managed to retain a loose connection with the Phaeacian scene in the Odyssey where the story of Mars and Venus is told. 24

On the other hand, substituting Amores 1.5 for the original Homeric passage drastically limits Lygia’s choices in responding. Although the meeting of Nausicaa and Odysseus on the beach has strong sexual connotations (the shipwrecked Odysseus has lost all his clothes and covers himself with a leafy branch when approaching the women), these are not made explicit in the greeting, which focuses on harmless compliments. Furthermore, the meeting on the beach does not lead to any sexual contact between Odysseus and Nausicaa, although the girl feels erotically attracted to him. The passage from Ovid, on the other hand, is taken from a poem that culminates in sexual intercourse, and the message is made explicit by the introduction of the “lover” Mars. This constellation leaves no option for Lygia to respond in a way comparable to that of the original scene. Completing Marcus’ greeting would in fact signal compliance with his erotic advances. Furthermore, Lygia’s image as a pure and protected virgin, while allowing for knowledge of the canonical poems of Homer, would be at odds with meticulous knowledge of Ovid’s erotic poems. So Lygia is left – at least for the moment – with no reply. (Later, though, after she and Marcus have been arrested, she will repeat the line “nothing do I see that is not perfection” to him. At that time, they are already engaged and Peter is about to bless their union. The line Lygia quotes is in itself completely harmless but,
even if the spectator realized the erotic subtext, it is no longer inappropriate now that Lygia and Marcus are going to be married.)

On the other hand, nothing in the garden scene points to the literary origins of the greeting. In the America of the 1950s, we would hardly expect a military man like Marcus to quote poetry; Petronius is not present, and the ordinary viewer is, of course, most unlikely to recognize the citation from Ovid. The actual effect is thus not that of the literary game of the novel. We have, instead, the impression that Marcus is so affected by the sight of Lygia that he speaks in a curious flowery style.

So the only scene in which the girl displays literary education disappears in the 1951 film. This does not necessarily imply that Lygia does not possess any such knowledge but, if she does, her education remains well hidden. She has, however, received her religious education directly from Paul. Marcus’ first encounter with Paul of Tarsus shows that it is a good idea for a girl to camouflage any higher education if she wishes to please him. When Paul is presented to Marcus Vinicius as Lygia’s teacher of philosophy, the soldier coldly states that “lovely women shouldn’t have the time to think that deeply.” He is, of course, wrong. In the scene in which Lygia first agrees to marry Marcus and then realizes that he cannot accept her love for Christ – this film’s version of the scene in the novel in which she confesses her love for Marcus to Crispus – she does not need any support from others to understand what she must do. Although Paul also speaks to Marcus, trying to clarify for him what is required of him in the Christian context (he proposes that Marcus free all his slaves), he is no more effectual than Lygia.

In the 1951 film, men overtly denigrate women’s intelligence, yet the women show more strength and intelligence than in the novel or earlier versions and they are also more sexually self-conscious. This film also transforms the romance between Petronius and Eunice. In the novel, Petronius simply decides that Eunice would be a good consolation for Vinicius after Lygia is rescued by the Christians, and the 1912 and the 1925 films follow the novel. In the 1951 version, however, Petronius assigns Eunice to Vinicius not as a substitute for Lygia, but as a gift to celebrate his triumph over Britain. As she is brought in by the overseer of slaves, Petronius “advertises” his present to Marcus, having Eunice lift her chin, making her turn around slowly and ordering her to fold her hands behind her head. Each move is commented on by Petronius (“did you ever see such skin, Marcus?” “Flawless proportions!” “Makes one wish one were a sculptor!”) while Eunice’s face expresses shy disapproval. When Petronius
finally orders her to be taken to Marcus’ apartment, Eunice refuses, as in
the other versions, but her sudden determination does not come as a
complete surprise. When Petronius asked the overseer for her name, the
girl had eagerly answered for herself (“You called me Eunice, my lord”) without caring about the angry reaction of the overseer. To her relief, it turns out that Marcus, whose mind is already set on Lygia, is not interested in her at all. Petronius is slightly offended, lamenting that he has just refused an offer from Seneca of six Arabian stallions for her. Marcus, with a knowing smile, advises him to keep her “because she is yours.” Petronius finally gives in, but orders, almost as an afterthought, to “give her five lashes, for impertinence.” When Eunice asks if that means she can stay, Petronius confirms that this depends only on her “future conduct” and advises the overseer to be careful and not to damage her skin. The overseer then takes her away and the film continues with the conversation of Marcus and Petronius about Lygia. Shortly afterwards, Eunice is seen hugging and kissing a bust of Petronius.

By shifting the focus of attention to the friendly quarrel between Marcus and Petronius about accepting or not accepting the “present,” the 1951 film makes Eunice’s refusal much less provocative. Instead of a rebellious behavior controlled by brutal force, her protest is but a minor annoyance for Petronius and a source of amusement for Marcus, who eyes her with a mixture of arrogance and sympathy. Consequently, the real issue at hand – Eunice’s wish to stay with Petronius forever – is settled without any forceful means. Petronius agrees not to send Eunice away if her “future conduct” is satisfying, and Eunice’s enthusiastic reaction promises him that he will have nothing to complain about. The (comparatively harmless) physical punishment then serves only as a “formal” recognition of Petronius’ authority.

Much in the conversation between Petronius, Marcus, and Eunice is phrased to resemble the relationship between an adult and an unruly child where questions of “conduct” and “impertinence” are characteristic. Men’s belittling women by treating them as mindless children is not foreign to the dynamic of the screwball/romantic comedy. Usually, this behavior is a sign of male immaturity which, during the love affair, gives way to a balanced appreciation of the partner. Women help to bring the change about by witty remarks and ironic comments that win the admiration of the man. In the 1951 version this behavioral pattern is most prominent in the early relationship between Marcus and Lygia but it is also visible in the early interaction of Petronius and Eunice.
Yet Eunice in the 1951 film, unlike the novel or earlier versions, is not content to love Petronius silently. While kissing his statue, she asks herself how she can reveal her desire to him. The crucial conversation about her lover is not between Petronius and his overseer but between Petronius and Eunice herself: When he concludes that her beloved must not be in his household, since she has denied desire for the candidates he has named, she emphatically insists that he is, while giving Petronius a look whose significance is unmistakable. She seduces him.

The treatment of Acte in the 1951 film is along similar lines. Nero sends Acte away when she annoys him by interrupting his contemplation of his model of the Rome he plans to build after the fire (she is trying to get him to eat). She warns him to “remember the look of Acte,” and promises that she will return when he needs her. At the end of the film, as he flees the mob after he has killed Poppaea, she appears as if from nowhere to help him commit suicide, pushing the dagger into his chest. She is at once completely subordinate to Nero, who is irritated precisely by her insistence on loving him, and independent of his power. Acte’s relationship to Nero bears some resemblances to that between Petronius and Eunice. In both cases, a socially inferior woman turns out to be a faithful lover of her partner, even though he is temporarily rejecting her. The similarity is hinted at in the scene in which he banishes her. Shortly before, we had seen Eunice singing and playing the harp for Petronius. After a cut and a short intermezzo in which Nero discusses plans with his architect, Acte steps into the room and, as she talks to Nero, Eunice’s harp is heard in the background.

The gender politics of the 1951 film are thus remarkably consistent. Almost all the men belittle women, and all the women are devoted to men, even to those who objectify and mistreat them. Yet these women are not mere victims of men; they are active and independent agents. When the men treat the women as if they were children, the men appear childlike.

Ethnicity and Gender Roles in the 1985 Version

This open machismo is discontinued in the 1985 and the 2001 film. The 1985 version offers a very different treatment, not only of gender but of ethnicity. It is the only film that does not include any literary greeting to Lygia at all (be it from Petronius or from Marcus) but introduces two new meetings between Marcus and Lygia as a substitute. During their first
meeting, Lygia is working in Aulus’ garden on a mosaic representing the nativity scene, with Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus taking shelter in a cave (Plate 3.1). Marcus approaches her and tries to make sense of the picture. He identifies the scene as a representation of Thetis, Vulcan, and the baby Achilles. Since Mary wears a blue dress in the mosaic, the association with the sea goddess Thetis is not out of place for a Roman. Lygia squarely replies that she wasn’t interested in mythology because “it is all so trite: Love and Psyche – you see them everywhere.” Vinicius then suggests that she might like “history” better. The picture might show Dido and Aeneas taking shelter in the cave during the storm, with a personification of little Eros between them. He even recites the appropriate verses from “the poet” who called that day “the first step towards death, the prime cause of all woes” for Dido (Verg. *Aen.* 4.169–70). Lygia immediately recognizes the verses as a quotation from Vergil. The scene thus stresses Marcus’ and
Lygia’s literary and artistic education: Both know at least parts of the *Aeneid* by heart. Unlike the 1951 film, which leaves Lygia without a matching answer, and unlike the novel where Marcus first watches Lygia secretly as she is bathing in a fountain (*QV* 1, 8), the 1985 series portrays both partners in their first encounter engaged in a discussion between equals. Lygia even has some small advantages over Marcus: When he insists on waiting for the return of Aulus (who is in Rome at the time), it is Lygia who gives him permission to stay. In the discussion, Marcus fails to recognize the nativity scene for what it is because he does not know the Christian tradition familiar to Lygia.

The second meeting, shortly after, shows Lygia on the bank of a river. As Marcus approaches, this time in his tribune’s uniform and on horseback, she greets him by admitting that she had been expecting him “as one does expect the nameless soldier who always comes back to gaze once again on the maiden made of ice and stone.” When Vinicius reacts confused, she answers with a little laugh: “I speak of things that are foreign to you, don’t I?,” but then willingly proceeds to explain the background of her enigmatic words: She is not a Roman, but a hostage from “a far off country, where the white trees grow in great, snow-covered forests,” and where her mother used to tell her a fairy tale about a girl imprisoned in a block of ice. When the girl saw a soldier passing by, she tried to cry out for help, but couldn’t because of the ice. Vinicius suggests that the story ended with the soldier’s rescuing the girl but Lygia admits that she never knew the true ending since her mother died in the war before she could finish the story.31

In the mosaic scene, Vinicius tries to connect to Lygia through his “Roman” interpretation of her art. Now Lygia can employ her national heritage to build up a relationship to Vinicius, likening his return to that of the soldier in her childhood fairy tale, even though white trees, snow-covered forests, and the fairy tale are in fact her only memories of her home country.32 While she rejected his Roman interpretation, he now readily accepts her story: By suggesting a positive ending, he implies a positive ending for their incipient love.

Lygia’s “barbaric” heritage is, in this scene, presented as valuable in itself. Rather than constituting a contradiction to Roman education, as suggested by Petronius’ comment in the novel, it is complementary to Latin literary achievements. Just as Lygia had absorbed knowledge of Vergil’s *Aeneid* and expertise in the art of Roman mosaics, so Marcus is now learning about the oral traditions of the Lygians without giving up his Roman identity. These implications of a dual cultural heritage are confirmed later in the
series when Lygia, imprisoned after the death of Nero’s child under suspicion of sorcery, evades her jailors’ questions by answering only in her native language. Her defense is finally broken when it turns out that Pedanius Secundus, the *praefectus urbis*, is fluent in the Lygian language. After a short conversation in the foreign language (represented by modern Polish), they switch back to “Latin,” with Lygia now willing to cooperate.

None of these details is found in the novel or in the other film versions where it is implied that Lygia was brought to Rome as a child and has probably forgotten her mother tongue. As in her encounters with Marcus, a successful communication is established because the partners involved have adopted (or are willing to adopt) a dual cultural background which includes language, geographical and social knowledge.

The “foreignness” of Lygia, in accordance with multicultural orthodoxy, is entirely cultural, not racial, and is only secondary and contingent. Lygia has a double, a street performer who looks astonishingly like her. They see each other and recognize the similarity. Since Lygia also accompanies Ursus when he performs as a strong man to raise money for charity, she belongs in part to the performer’s world in any case. The “false Lygia” is important for the story only during the fire when Vinicius mistakes her for Lygia; she is buried by the rubble of a falling building. Ursus manages to uncover her and they discover that she is not Lygia after all. This episode is itself not integral; it seems to be included entirely for its symbolic value. The girls’ resemblance stands for a humanity that crosses both ethnic and class divisions.

While the emphasis on intercultural communication in the 1985 series is most likely motivated by the sociological and political problems of contemporary Italy (see p. 117), it has an impact on gender roles as well. Since the “foreign” heritage of Lygia constitutes a value even the Roman *praefectus urbis* considers worth acquiring, she possesses a genuine area in which she is privileged over Marcus. Just as in previous versions Petronius (or Marcus) did not take “the girl’s” knowledge of Homer for granted, but admired her for it, so now Lygia assumes that her folktales are “foreign” to Marcus and is astonished to discover Pedanius Secundus’ language skills. With the cultural appreciation going both ways, there is no room for the blatant machismo of the 1951 film or the slightly condescending ways of earlier versions.

Lygia’s stronger status is also mirrored in a higher activity and independence. She still has Ursus as a faithful ally at her side but, unlike in earlier versions, she is herself an active and resourceful member of the Christian
community. She tries to raise money for her fellow believers and seems to rely on a secret network of other helpers providing her with housing, clothes, and food while she hides from Nero’s men. When Marcus discovers her by chance in her hideout in Petronius’ house, she is at first frightened but quickly regains control of the situation and tells Marcus what to do and how to behave.

Consequently, the fascination between Marcus and Lygia is, in this version, that of equal partners. Both possess and maintain their individual cultural and social background and both rely on resources to which the other does not have immediate access. While Lygia is good at finding hideouts with the help of the secret Christian community, once she is arrested Marcus uses his position as tribune to try and free her from the Mamertine prison.

As we will show below, diversity is a core issue of the 1985 version, and the sympathetic characters in the film generally show a disposition to appreciate those who are different from themselves. In its rendering of the scene between Eunice and Petronius which is, after all, entirely about power, this leads to a peculiar tension absent from the novel and the earlier film versions. Just as in the novel, Petronius offers Eunice to Vinicius after a conversation about Lygia but the slave girl is no “substitute” for Lygia and she is not meant to go to and live with Marcus. In this version, not only has Lygia not gone into hiding yet but, on the contrary, the relationship between her and Marcus is developing positively. All Petronius offers, therefore, is a one-night stand, inviting Marcus to choose from several exotic slave girls. After describing the other women in his household, Eunice comes in as a special offer and Petronius quickly remarks that “she tends to my needs, really, but if you like . . .” Marcus then chooses Salica, a slave girl Petronius has told him was eyeing him, and he does so by politely asking her if she would like to go with him. It then becomes apparent that indeed the slave girl finds him attractive and later in the series, when Marcus is in a serious relationship with Lygia, the same slave girl is saddened because he has no longer asked for her. When Marcus and Salica have left, Eunice complains to Petronius that he would have given her away “like a jug of wine.” Petronius reminds her that she is a slave subject to his will and asks her, with a sympathetic smile, if she was rebelling against the law. Eunice denies this and Petronius goes into a speech about the good life of slaves: their food and healthcare is provided for by their masters lest their value decrease. But here, too, he is not serious: “That is what I should have
Trimalchio say,” he muses, and quickly orders Eunice to remind him “to jot it down” the next day. He then adds, apparently from his own perspective, a few observations along the same lines, notably that the slaves should be glad because “their work is assured.” In contrast to his previous remarks, which all have parallels in Roman writings about slavery, the high esteem for “work” as such is alien from the sources. A person may be worried when his financial supplies were not assured or when he was forced to engage in activities below his social standing. But a possible lack of work is a concern typical only of modern industrialized countries where most people are wage earners and unemployment is a central social and political problem. Unemployment was a special concern in the Italy of the mid-eighties when the film was made (La Repubblica, one of the leading newspapers, called the year 1984 a black year for employment), and Petronius’ remark, anachronistic as it is, would therefore resonate with many contemporary spectators.

Not surprisingly, Eunice is not happy about his description of the slaves’ condition and she is not afraid to observe that the servants may well wish “the freedom to give all this up.” Petronius responds cynically that “you have that freedom, too: you can die whenever you like.” At his words, Eunice, who had been massaging his temples, turns away angrily and Petronius is quick to tell her that “if you remember one thing, I will never forgive you.”

The scene gives a completely different view of the relationship of Petronius and Eunice. Although Petronius reminds her that he is perfectly entitled to do with her what he wants, Eunice’s behavior shows that she has, at least for the time being, nothing to fear from him. She expresses her disapproval both verbally and non-verbally, without his threatening or insulting, let alone punishing her. Instead, Petronius gently orders her to “go now and get some rest,” and the scene closes as he fondly wishes her goodnight. Once outside the room, Eunice kneels down in prayer, wishing “may the gods protect your sleep.”

While Eunice had been, in all previous versions, one of many slave girls (Petronius even remembers her good looks, but not her name, in the 1951 film), the 1985 version leaves no doubt that Eunice plays a special role in the household. This is confirmed in later scenes: during the great fire, Petronius entrusts the keys to the food supplies to Eunice, gently smiling when she reminds him that this was the traditional task for the mistress of the house. And while Petronius had asked her, in their first conversation,
only to “remind him” of the speech he had envisioned for Trimalchio, Eunice is soon seen collaborating with him on the Satyricon, assessing scenes and discussing the progress of the work with her master.

At this point, at the latest, it becomes doubtful whether the relationship between Petronius and Eunice in the 1985 miniseries can properly be described as a master–slave relationship at all. Although Petronius apparently does not have her sleep in his bedroom until shortly before his suicide, Eunice does in fact act as his “wife” and confidante throughout the film. (When he asks her to stay with him for the night and on future nights, he seems to be seeking comfort more than sexual satisfaction.) The innovation is made possible, partly, by the temporary removal of Chrysothemis who is Petronius’ courtesan at the beginning of the novel and in the other film versions. In the 1985 version, however, Chrysothemis is, at first, only the dealer from whom Petronius purchased one of his slave girls. When Chrysothemis later succeeds in winning Petronius’ attention, Eunice observes the flirting and kissing couple with open dismay. The relationship with Chrysothemis is brief, however, and in the end it will be not she but Eunice who follows Petronius into death (Plate 3.2).

The reinterpretation of Eunice’s and Petronius’ affair is in line with the representation of the interaction of men and women throughout the series. Although the social and political boundaries dividing the different groups of society remain formally intact, they are, in practical terms, overcome and nullified by the behavior of the individual. Women, for example, remain under the jurisdiction of men even in the 1985 film (as shown by the house-trial of Pomponia) but the love between husband and wife prevents a tragic outcome. Pomponia is freed even though Aulus has no legal “proof” of her innocence. Similarly, Petronius’ legal power over Eunice is beyond question (he explicitly asks her if she was defying the law) but he never exerts it because he is emotionally attached to Eunice. But while the novel and the earlier films acknowledged that the good looks of a slave girl could in one way or the other mitigate her fate (the crudest example, repeated in all earlier versions, is Petronius’ order to his overseer “not to damage” Eunice’s skin), the 1985 Petronius is not attracted only by Eunice’s beauty. Unlike in earlier versions, Eunice is literate and apparently shares with Petronius a genuine interest in literature and writing. He is eager to hear her opinion about his Satyricon and she seemingly enjoys the working session as a knowledgeable partner.

The parallel between Eunice and Acte observed in the 1951 version is kept up and reinforced in the 1985 miniseries, where both women die for
their beloved: Eunice opens her veins to accompany Petronius in death (but manages to hide the injury from him, knowing that he would not approve), while Acte throws herself into the way of the assassin who in this version tries to stab Nero.36

Partnership, rather than male chauvinism and exertion of power, is therefore a characteristic feature of the Italian 1985 version. It belongs with the political self-consciousness of the miniseries. Feminist movements from the sixties onward had, for example, protested against the presentation of women as sex objects and, although the market for such productions had hardly vanished, it was now no longer considered politically correct to display such attitudes openly. Hence, even the scene in which Petronius offers girls to Vinicius is considerably mitigated. Although Petronius advertises them in a way familiar from representations of a slave-market, he indicates to Vinicius that at least Salica is genuinely interested
in him. Having Salica agree to go with him and portraying her as lovesick in a later scene allows the directors to evoke the titillating atmosphere of sexually available women while remaining politically correct. In Petronius’ household, no slave, man or woman, is ever forced to do something against their will and Marcus, according to his own statement, does not even possess a slave (or even the money for a household of his own).

The basic partnership of men and women that surmounts all traditional inequities even applies to such marginal figures as Chilo Chilonides who only in this version has a woman, Polymnia, living with him. She is first introduced when Petronius, while conducting his inquiry on Pedanius’ murder, stops at Chilo’s pub to question him. Polymnia, who is cleaning up in the background, interferes in the conversation on behalf of Chilo, assuring Petronius that “he is not a bad man.” Although Chilo silences her harshly, his love for her becomes apparent when Polymnia, secretly a Christian, falls victim to the Neronian persecution. Chilo is desperate to discover her among Tigellinus’ prisoners and tries in vain to persuade her to renounce. Finally, he witnesses her being burnt at the stake and in his fury and desperation tries to strangle Nero, who stands nearby, accusing him of arson and murder of the innocent. Even in the squalid living conditions of the dubious Chilo, there exists, therefore, a genuine cooperation and partnership between men and women.

Cruelty and sexual abuse of women is, in the 1985 series, a characteristic of the real villain, Nero. He deliberately murders Rufius, the son of Poppaea from her first marriage (Poppaea’s devotion to her son is a redeeming quality in this version; in others she has no sympathetic qualities at all). When Volusius Proculus, commander of the Roman fleet at Misenum, tells him that Epicharis, owner of a luxury brothel in Rome, is part of a conspiracy (the Pisonian conspiracy), he goes to see her and, with the praetorians standing guard, threatens and finally rapes her. Epicharis is then put under curfew and later arrested and tortured by order of Tigellinus. While being carried, bound, in the back of a wagon, she manages to throw herself off and is killed. The character of Epicharis does not appear in the novel (not surprisingly, since only the 1985 version adjusts chronology to bring the Pisonian conspiracy into its frame).

These events are roughly based on Tacitus’ narrative in the *Annales*. There, the freedwoman Epicharis encourages the lingering conspirators, tries to win the commander of the Misenum fleet for their plans, and is betrayed by him to Nero. She is put under custody (*Ann. 15.51*) and
tortured by order of Nero. Defying the tormentors, she keeps her secrets and finally manages to strangle herself on the way to a second interrogation. Tacitus praises her as an example of courage and loyalty, surpassing even Roman knights and senators (Ann. 15.57, cf. Cassius Dio 62.27.3). There is no direct reference, however, to Epicharis as a prostitute. Tacitus says that he was not sure how Epicharis gained knowledge about the conspiracy since she “had never cared about anything honorable before” (Ann. 15.51). This might hint at sexual promiscuity (a stock motif in Roman literature for politically active women) but is in itself unspecific. Furthermore, if Polyaen. Strat. 8.62 is correct, Epicharis was the girlfriend of Annaeus Mela, a relative of the poet Lucan and the philosopher Seneca and had, therefore, access to the inner circle of the Roman nobility.

In the 1985 miniseries, Epicharis is a friend of Petronius who has helped supply him with material for the Satyricon. She is based on the stereotypical kind-hearted prostitute but her strength and courage, as Tacitus remarks, makes her the moral equal (at least) of the Pisonians, men of the elite whose motives are not entirely pure. Furthermore, in this version, the conspiracy fails because Acte throws herself between Nero and his attacker and dies in his place. Both sides of the conspiracy have heroic women.

The film, even while it shows a patriarchal and male-dominant society, insists on an underlying equality. It also blurs gender distinctions: men use excessive make-up and behave and move effeminately. Most of them belong to the royal court but there is also a raucous performance by a street troupe whose costumes blur gender distinctions. (Much of this seems to be hommage to Fellini, since it gives the film the “look” of Fellini’s Satyricon.) Homosexual erotic acts, on the other hand, only occur within the palace where they are occasionally displayed by male actors for the amusement of the emperor. Yet although Brandauer’s Nero seems sexually ambiguous in style (it can be hard to distinguish the vanity that he gives Nero from effeminacy), his actions are consistently heterosexual. (He discusses the erotic qualities of Lygia with Petronius as he does in the novel, he has a child by Poppaea, and he has sexual relations with Epicharis.) There is no hint at the sexual aberrations Tacitus and Suetonius attribute to Nero. While several of the vices ascribed to him in the Annales and in Suetonius’ biography are stock motifs about evil emperors (Nero commits incest, like Caligula, Suet. Nero 28.2, cp. Suet. Cal. 24), only Nero is accused by ancient historians of being married to a man and to a woman at the same time. What is more, the “wife” is, in Suetonius’ account, a freedman whom the

Apart from Nero’s rape of Epicharis in the 1985 miniseries, his only acts of sexual violence are found in the 1925 version, where he tries to rape Lygia while she is being held at the imperial palace (Plate 1.1) and in the basement where she hides after her Christian friends have rescued her from Petronius’ litter. The scenes are not found in the novel and are probably derived from a brief allusion to Nero’s rape of the Vestal Virgin Rubria, as reported by Tacitus and mentioned by Sienkiewicz (see p. 174). The absence of sexual aberrations in the novel can best be explained by the time it was written (even for a crazy emperor, descriptions of this kind would surely have been off limits in the nineteenth century). Guazzoni’s 1912 film follows the novel very closely; the 1925 version makes Nero a direct sexual threat to Lygia which perhaps does not leave much room for other sexual adventures. An overt allusion to homosexual sex in a Hollywood film of 1951 would be unthinkable: one need only think of the famous censoring of the “snails and oyster” sequence in Spartacus. In the 1985 miniseries, however, its absence may seem surprising since this version in other contexts freely uses the historical record to supplement the novel itself. Here, too, a form of political correctness may be at work. Nero’s sexual behavior is cruel. To depict a perverse emperor as engaging in homosexual acts might mean to some members of the audience that homosexual acts are characteristic of cruel and perverse men.

Adaptations in the 2001 Version

The 2001 Polish version, which stays close to the novel, does not explore ethnicity and gender but adapts both to the situation of Catholic, post-communist Poland. Petronius and Lygia meet in the garden of Aulus’ Plautius where Lygia is playing ball with her stepbrother. They exchange the Homeric greeting and Petronius, raising his eyebrows with surprise and satisfaction, expresses his amazement to Aulus: “To hear Homer’s verse from a young maid’s lips . . .” Marcus, too, is visibly pleased. Nothing in their behavior suggests that they consider Lygia’s knowledge as inappropriate for a girl, as the 1951 Marcus does, and the pleased looks on the faces of Lygia’s stepparents confirm this impression. When Aulus proudly explains that they have a Greek tutor for their son, whose lessons Lygia follows,
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he indirectly acknowledges that her literary education is rare and has to be explained but is still admirable.

Still, there is a slight but remarkable deviation from the novel, in which Petronius is astonished “to hear verses of Homer from the lips of a maiden of whose barbarian extraction he had heard previously.” (QV 2, 24–5). The shift of emphasis from “barbarian” to “girl” moves the spectator’s attention away from the distinction between the “civilized” Roman world and the “wild” barbarians. This tendency is visible throughout the Polish film of 2001. While the novel occasionally stresses the contrast between the “healthy,” “vigorous,” “pure” barbarians and decadent, over-refined Roman society (see, e.g., QV 26, 212–13), the film downplays such national differences. Lygia and Ursus distinguish themselves from Roman depravity by their pure lives but nobody ever suggests that they are less appreciative than Romans of true cultural achievements, such as literature. The opposition between pure, simple Lygian and over-refined Roman had become obsolete in 2001, with post-communist Poland struggling to reconnect to Western Europe. With Polish spectators identifying themselves with Lygia and Ursus, a strong emphasis on their barbaric origins would have been offensive. Furthermore, any lingering western, especially European, illusions about the positive, revitalizing power of an archaic way of life, put forward among others by Rousseau, had been finally destroyed by the experience of national socialist ideology. Hence, instead of being a “barbarian” who nonetheless can master Roman culture, Lygia in this film effortlessly melds the valued high culture of the ancient world with Christian purity. If her blond prettiness seems distinctly Northern European, Poppaea is blond, too, and indeed the women look somewhat alike. In the scene in the gardens, they are sharply differentiated by Poppaea’s dress, elaborate hairstyle, and jewelry against Lygia’s unadorned simplicity. The characters who symbolize Poland are different from Romans only by being better, not by having a different culture or by racial difference.

The 2001 film’s good women are almost as passive as they were in the silent versions – but not quite. Ursus rescues Lygia from the banquet. However, the film cuts from the meeting between Poppaea and Lygia in the garden to the scene where Vinicius’ servant comes to fetch her from Acte’s rooms. After Lygia leaves, the camera lingers on Acte’s worried face in close-up. The scene then shifts to Vinicius’ house, where Petronius is rebuking Vinicius for his vulgar behavior of the night before and advising him to tell Lygia she will be able to return home while persuading her to stay. The slaves then enter to report that Lygia has been abducted. There is thus a
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certain ambiguity about how Lygia’s escape has been planned and executed: when Vinicius upbraids Acte, she tells him that what happened was in accordance with “Lygia’s will.” The possibility is open that Acte and Lygia herself have taken an active role in saving her, though we do not see it.

In the scene with Crispus, Peter, and Paul, Lygia not only kneels at Peter’s feet but directly asks him for help, explaining, “I cannot trust myself, and I cannot fight love.” Similarly, in the Eunice plot, when Eunice begs Petronius not to give her to Vinicius, she says, “I would rather be flogged than be driven away.” Petronius then says to his overseer, “She will stay here,” and only then gives the order that she be flogged. When they next meet, and she tells Petronius Chilo’s prediction about her future pain and joy, the words follow Sienkiewicz’s but the gestures do not quite fit what the novel says and implies: Eunice looks slightly smug from the beginning of the scene, and she looks directly at Petronius when she says that her joy has come because she is staying in his house. There is no whispering or welling tears, and it appears that Petronius understands the message perfectly. The film does not significantly change the plot in order to make the gender roles more acceptable to contemporary audiences. Yet even this need to honor the literary source does not prevent the film from nudging the plot to make the women more active and self-confident.

Each version, then, within its constraints, turns the plot to fit the expectations of its own time and place about both gender roles and ethnic difference. While the 1951 film and the 1985 miniseries are bolder than the others in changing the plot to accommodate contemporary attitudes, the 1925 and the 2001 versions do so too. The 1912 film is the most restrained. The “silent classics” release of this film suppresses Lygia’s barbarian origins by making her a Greek princess. The 1925 version is remarkable for its heroic mother; the 1951 for its subordinate yet morally independent women; the 1985 for its multiculturalism and emphasis on equality; the 2001 for its attempt to make ancient Rome a suitable invented past for contemporary Poland.

Notes

1 Very close to the Quo Vadis? plot is F. W. Farrar’s Darkness and Dawn (1891) in which Claudia, daughter of a British chieftain, is raised by Pomponia Graecina as a Christian and falls in love with the pagan centurion Pudens who

2 The nature of Pomponia’s alleged superstition is not clear. Suggestions include both Judaism (see Koestermann 1963 on Tac. *Ann.* 13.33.2, who compares Dio 67.14.2: accusations against Flavius Clemens, consul of 95 CE) and Christianity (inscriptions show that ca. 150 years later members of the Pomponii were Christians but there is no proof that this tradition goes back to Pomponia Graecina herself).

3 Julia died in 43. Her family was loosely related to the Pomponii because Drusus’ mother Vipsania had been a granddaughter of Pomponius Atticus (see Koestermann 1963 on Tac. *Ann.* 1.12.4). Her death is briefly mentioned by Suetonius (*Claud.* 29.1) and Cassius Dio (60.18.4).

4 Epilogue, 422: “On the morrow the faithful Acte wrapped his body in costly stuffs, and burned him on a pile filled with perfumes.” Suetonius mentions the faithfulness of Acte and reports that she and Nero’s nurses buried his remains in the family tomb of the Domitii (*Suet. Nero* 50). Following Suetonius, Sienkiewicz does not include Acte among those who were present at Nero’s suicide.

5 The idea that Acte was, if not herself a Christian, at least a sympathizer with Christianity is probably inspired by Renan who mentions (with some doubts) the theory that Acte was a Christian (p. 159 n. 5). It also occurs in other nineteenth-century novels, see n. 1.

6 In some of the cinematic versions, Eunice burns incense to the statue of Petronius. In the 1925 film, she does so at the recommendation of Chilo who sells the incense grains to her as a love charm. (This reel is missing in the copy at UCLA). In the 1951 version she kisses the statue spontaneously when nobody is watching.


9 This intertitle is found in the “Silent Screen Classics” version, translated from an unidentified French or German print. The Amsterdam copy does not mention ethnicity here. This scene does not appear in the French 1923 re-release, but elsewhere it calls Lygia “Lygian.”

10 Again, in the Amsterdam version the word “enough” does not appear; the whole sequence disappears in the 1923 re-release, where Petronius seems to succumb to Eunice as soon as she begs him not to be sent away (she calls him “tu” in this intertitle).

11 The idea to have Petronius carry a kind of swagger stick apparently derives from a short remark in the novel where Petronius is said to address the
enraged people, riding his horse and holding “a slender ivory cane which he carried habitually” (QV 46, 358; it is visible in Plate 2.2, from the 1912 version, and in Plate 2.5, from 2001, adapting QV 46).

Although the spectator assumes the perspective of the voyeuristic bystander, nothing in the scene’s arrangement invites reflection on his role as a cinematic audience. Other directors, such as Cecil de Mille in Sign of the Cross and, more recently Ridley Scott in Gladiator, make the cinematic spectator aware of complicity in the voyeurism of the arena (cp. Maximus’ shout “Are you not entertained?”).

In the novel, Lygia is sometimes close to fainting, e.g., during the banquet of Nero when Marcus is making his first sexual advances (QV 7, 67: “She grew weak. It seemed at moments to her that she would faint and then something terrible would happen”). In the silent movies, however, some of Lygia's more theatrical gestures reflect the strong influence of opera on early silent films. Similar effects can, for example, be observed in Cabiria (1914).

In the 1925 version, he reacts to Lygia’s desperate plea when they meet in the imperial gardens: “I entreat thee, Ursus, seek some way by which we may return to the house of Plautus!” [sic].

Since she had a six- or seven-year-old son, Pomponia would not be “old” by today’s standards.

The representation of the games in the 1912 version is modeled on paintings by Gérôme, most notably the gladiator scene which faithfully re-enacts the perspective and costumes of “Pollice Verso.”

D’Amelia 2005 traces the development of the myth of the Italian mother. Of special interest are the monument to the Italian mother in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence, inaugurated on November 4, 1926 (D’Amelia 2005: 197–205: the ceremony did not have much public resonance, however) and the public idealization of Mussolini’s mother, beginning in 1923 (D’Amelia 2005: 239–46).


On these and related films, see Haskell 1974: 225–30.

For the experiences of these women, including how the experience changed them, see Gluck 1987.

Cyrino (2005: 24–5) notes that in this scene Lygia is seen lighting a lamp which is “suggestive of the illumination she will ultimately impart” to Vinicius. The scene foreshadows the equality in partnership the couple will reach at the end of the film but it does so in a way that only spectators who are already familiar with the plot will be able to recognize.
24 Of course the meeting between Lygia and Marcus is perfectly understandable without any familiarity with either Homer or Ovid, or even without any knowledge of Mars and Venus. Marcus’ explicit statement that Venus was “welcoming her lover” and the style of his speech makes sufficiently clear that he is comparing himself and Lygia to a pair of literary lovers.

25 In the novel, there is no hint that the name Eunice was given her by Petronius. In the film, however, the name (“good victory”) matches the occasion for which she is presented (Marcus’ victory parade).

26 At first glance, it is less obvious in Petronius’ case because of the different acting styles of Robert Taylor and Leo Genn. While Taylor conveys the asymmetry of the relationship most effectively by his gestures, Genn gives fewer non-verbal clues. The text of the Eunice scene, however, is unequivocal.

27 McAlister (2001: 75–6) argues that this film and other Biblical epics posit sexual slavery (which parallels and stands for political oppression) as the problem, willing subordination in marriage as the solution. But it is not clear that Lygia will be subordinate in marriage.

28 Strangely, however, Vinicius identifies Achilles as the son of Vulcan. The error probably originates from Homer Iliad 18.369–617 where Thetis goes to find Hephaestus (identified by the Romans with Vulcan) and beseeches him to provide new armor for Achilles.

29 The story of Amor (“Love”) and Psyche is not part of the mainstream mythic tradition but only transmitted as a fairy tale in Apuleius’ Metamorphoses. Examples of the story in ancient art are very few compared to the number of pictures showing Achilles and the Trojan myth adduced by Vinicius. Lygia’s choice is motivated by the name of Amor, fitting Vinicius’ erotic interest in her. By rejecting the Amor myth, Lygia indirectly repeats her reserved reaction to Vinicius’ earlier attempts at flirtation. At the same time, “Amor and Psyche,” while rare in ancient art, is a popular motif in Renaissance and modern sculpture and painting, especially in Italy. So a modern audience may well accept Lygia’s impression that “you see it everywhere.” The spectator may, therefore, feel culturally closer to Lygia than to Vinicius whose examples are more obscure for the average modern spectator.

30 Eros is not present in the cave scene in book four of the Aeneid, where the protecting goddess is Juno, but he kindles Dido’s love for Aeneas during the banquet in her palace Verg. Aen. 1.715–22).

31 In the novel, Lygia’s mother does not die during the war but is handed over to the Romans together with the girl. She then dies while Lygia is still a child (QV 1, 9). The alteration has obviously been introduced to stress the unfinished story and to offer Marcus the chance to suggest the positive ending.

32 In Lygia’s account, the country remains nameless so that it cannot be located on a map and is defined only by some of its characteristic features (white trees, snow, forests). All of these form a striking contrast to the actual setting of the
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scene (Lygia and Vinicius are sitting under a makeshift tent, held up by four maids, which protects them from the burning sun, and several times they lift their hands to protect their eyes from the sunlight; the landscape is green and pleasant and, although there are bushes and trees, they are scattered and do not form a forest).

33 Although she knows her birth name “Callina,” the girl prefers to be called “Lygia,” adopting her people’s name as her own. She thereby adopts the Romans’ perspective (for whom it was customary to call slaves by their place or people of origin) while at the same time stressing her difference.

34 In 1984, the employment rate in Italy had sunk by 5.5 percent for the second year in a row; see La Repubblica, March 24/25, 1985, p. 35.

35 The discourse about suicide as a way of escape from slavery serves to prepare the actual suicide scene at the end of the film when Petronius has his veins cut after falling into disgrace with Nero. In her first move of disobedience, Eunice decides to follow suit and dies along with him.

36 The resemblance between the two is noted by TV critic Paolo D’Agostini (La Repubblica, March 24, 1985, p. 19), but he does not offer further comment.

37 This may be a deliberate inversion of Pomponia’s pulling herself into the chariot in the 1925 version.

38 Sempronia, a participant in the conspiracy of Catiline, is another example; see Sallust, Cat. 25.

39 Koestermann (1963: 273) suspects that Tacitus, perhaps under the influence of the historian Fabius Rusticus, suppressed evidence that Seneca was involved in the conspiracy.

40 In the novel, make-up for (apparently male) children is mentioned as a part of the court’s luxury as a kind of sunscreen (QV 36, 287: In Nero’s entourage on his way to Actium, there are “children resembling Cupids, with wonderful faces, but faces covered completely with a thick coating of cosmetics, lest the wind of the Campania might tan their delicate complexion”). There is no reference to homosexuality, however.

41 In Ann. 48.1, Tacitus reports that women (feminae) joined the conspiracy along with Roman senators and knights. He later only mentions Epicharis by name so it is unclear whether feminae is supposed to be a rhetorical plural.

42 Only the European release of the 1925 film has both rape scenes, while the American release cuts out the second along with the “temptation” of Lygia, although it tends to have more biblical allusions than the European one.

43 Under the Nazi regime, excavations of prehistoric Germanic sites were intensified under the auspices of SS chief Himmler. Speer claimed that Hitler expressed some concerns that this research would prove “that we were still throwing stone axes and hunking around open fires when Greece and Rome had already reached the peak of civilization” (Speer 1993: 108). Nonetheless,
archaeological findings and Tacitus’ *Germania* served as models for huge political, pseudo-Germanic spectacles, celebrating, for example, the summer solstice (see Lund 1995: 39–40). An edition of the *Germania* was published in 1943 by Rudolf Till in the national socialist series *Ahnenerbe* (“ancestral heritage”) and dedicated to Himmler. The Nazi regime was especially thrilled by Tacitus’ claim that there were no intermarriages between Germanic and non-Germanic tribes (Tac. Germ. 4) and some philologists compared the Nuremberg laws prohibiting intermarriage between “Aryans” and “non-Aryans.” The commentaries on the *Germania* by Rudolf Much (1937) and Eugen Fehrle (3rd edn 1939) mirror this ideology. For the Nazis’ reception of Tacitus’ *Germania*, see Lund 1995.
Political Institutions, Political Subtexts

Although the *Quo Vadis?* story is almost exclusively set in Rome (except for Nero’s brief stay in Arctium and his flight to the outskirts of the city when Galba approaches), domestic politics are conspicuously absent from the novel and most of the films. While the senate often appears in other toga movies, such as *Spartacus* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, the senate and the magistrates of the principate are almost invisible in *Quo Vadis* except for the prefect of the praetorians, who is closely associated with the emperor. Senators are sometimes addressed as “Senator,” but we never see them in an official assembly, nor is there much of a corporate spirit among them. Even in the 1985 Italian version, which introduces the office of the city prefect, the *praefectus urbis* (absent from the novel), and mentions the senate relatively frequently, its formal meetings are ignored. So, for that matter, is the imperial bureaucracy. Instead, politics at Nero’s court are highly personal. The court, and, in consequence, the empire, are ruled by the whims of the emperor, unrestrained by any institutional control. The only political forces the emperor seems to fear are the praetorians and the *populus*, whom he tries to appease after the great fire.

In the novel, the phenomenon can possibly be explained by Sienkiewicz’s equation of Nero’s Rome with the European regimes of his time. As Barron has shown, the author was also deeply impressed by the American democratic society he had observed during a prolonged stay in the United States (1876–9). After returning to Europe, he harshly criticized the status quo of European society and especially the hierarchic structure of its administration and bureaucracy. In a letter from Paris, he writes:

Someone may ask: Is this a republic? Is this a democracy? But it is neither a republic nor a democracy. This is an unfinished banquet from the epoch of the last Nero. After a long Caesarean feast the roosters crow for daybreak. Go to the outskirts of Paris; here the calm and dark city sleeps quietly – here
sleeps the future Republic in order to resume tomorrow the work of revival with refreshed strength. [...]  
I could say plenty of the French Republic, and particularly of French democracy. Both are far behind the Americans. Here they still declaim freedom – in America they live it. Here democracy exists in their heads, in America it has become a custom. [...] Here a bureaucracy exists, higher and lower civil servants, a whole hierarchy of them – in America, there is no such hierarchy.²  
The novel shows many individuals (but not institutions) at the emperor’s service, constantly competing for their place in the hierarchy. Their power lies either with their personal cleverness, which enables them to gain and retain the emperor’s favor (especially true for Petronius), or with military might (most obvious in Tigellinus). When Nero considers sacrificing Tigellinus as a scapegoat to the enraged mob of homeless people after the great fire, Tigellinus answers with a barely concealed threat to turn the praetorian guards against Nero (QV 48, 371). Although it is the task of the praetorians to protect the ruler, Tigellinus here suggests that their loyalty lies not with the institution of the emperor but with their commander. Rule by personality turns against the emperor himself.³  
The power struggle between the courtiers is so fierce (and relatively open) because Nero has no heir. His only child is a daughter who falls ill in the first third of the novel and dies. When Petronius and Scaevinus later discuss the political options for Nero’s succession, Scaevinus reminds Petronius that “Caesar is childless [...] and all see his successor in Piso” (QV 64, 490). A possible option for Nero would have been Poppaea’s son Rufius (from her first marriage with Rufius Crispinus) but the emperor hates his stepson (QV 52, 399) and never makes any attempt to choose a successor.⁴  
Except for the 1985 miniseries, the films leave out Rufius and only mention the death of the little girl which is important to the plot because it leads to Nero’s suspicion against Lygia. However, the 1925 version replaces the (historically attested) girl by a boy named Livius and pointedly tells the spectator that he was “the only child of Nero.”⁵ While the change of sex does not affect the plot, it strengthens the theme that, with the loss of his child, Nero loses his heir to the throne. While in all the films the emperor’s mourning shows him as a father and therefore evokes sympathy in the audience, these feelings may be weakened if the dead child is also his successor and his grief is not without self-interest.
Only the 1985 miniseries addresses dynastic complications more extensively. Rufius appears several times. Nero loathes the boy and takes every opportunity to frighten and humiliate him. At one point after the great fire, Nero tells Rufius with a malicious smile, “You can learn from me. I also grew up in the house of a man who was not my father.” When Poppaea claims that Nero hates him “because he is my son only,” Petronius objects: “It’s not for that, Poppaea: Nero sees in Rufius a mortal enemy because he sees himself in the boy. A child growing up in the shadow of a man not his father.” The parallel between the emperor and the boy helps to make Rufius’ role as a potential successor obvious and the topic is repeatedly brought back to the spectator’s mind. In one scene, the child hides in Nero’s palace theater after the emperor had ordered everybody out. When Nero discovers him, he pushes the boy violently to the ground, hurting him. After Rufius has been taken to safety by Poppaea, Nero tries to pick up Rufius’ crown which has fallen to the ground. As he touches it, his fingers are stained with the boy’s blood. Some time later, Rufius falls victim to political intrigues: after Lygia has been imprisoned and her execution seems imminent, Petronius approaches Poppaea for help, promising to save Rufius from Nero if she agrees to free Lygia. The plan is to make Nero believe that Poppaea is pregnant by Nero and has threatened to kill the unborn child should Rufius be harmed. The conversation is overheard by Tigellinus who has Rufius killed instantly.

The most influential character in the novel, Gaius Petronius, does not hold a political or military office at the time of the plot at all but exercises his power over Nero as his arbiter elegantiarum (see Tac. Ann. 16.18). Petronius’ influence lasts only as long as he is able to retain the emperor’s favor. All the other characters in Nero’s closer circle are less developed; they have names, occasionally a physical characteristic, a style of flattering Nero, and some biographical information, but no interest in themselves. The novel several times applies the term “Augustians” (Curtin), “Augustans” (Kuniczak) or “Augstales” (Malevsky) to this group. The similarity with the “Augustiani” attested in Tacitus and Suetonius seems to imply they are members of the specially trained group of claqueurs who supported Nero during his performances. If this is the case, their qualification to enter the inner circle of imperial power is not a political one but again based on Nero’s choice. Their personal background and their political views, if they hold any, remain in the dark.
The lack of a political program is especially evident in the novel when members of the nobility first admit to each other their discomfort with Nero’s reign. In *QV* 64 (490–2), Scaevinus approaches Petronius on behalf of the Pisonians. Petronius refuses to participate but also makes it clear that he will not betray the conspiracy. The issue is entirely Nero’s personality, not any aspect of the imperial system or specific policies, and similarly the novel attributes Nero’s fall to his own failure to take threats to his power seriously (Epilogue, 536).

**Political Implications of the Silent Versions**

This void makes Nero’s rule available to be filled with contemporary meaning. The 1912 version, for example, evokes political themes through a curious detail in the scene of Marcus Vinicius’ baptism. After Lygia has been abducted by the Christians, Marcus wins the friendship of the apostle Peter who agrees to take him to the house of the stonemason Glaucus where Lygia is hiding. There, the couple is reunited to the joy of Ursus and other Christians. Marcus, now familiar with Christian teachings, demands baptism. Peter agrees and the crowd of people gathered around them disperses to the left and right of the picture, leaving Peter in the center with Marcus and Lygia kneeling before him. When Ursus steps aside, he reveals an axe and a sickle arranged on the back wall of the room in a way strongly resembling the communist symbol of hammer and sickle. The choreography of the scene links the apostle Peter and the ritual of Christian baptism to the emblem. Since the film was made a good five years before the Russian revolution, there is no way the director could possibly anticipate the specific significance this symbol would acquire in communist regimes. But already in his time, various working tools, usually arranged crosswise, were widely used as a symbol in socialist and workers’ circles. Only in October of 1919, after the Third Socialist International, however, were they officially adopted by socialist organizations in Italy where the film was made.

Displaying axe and sickle in the house of a stonemason, anachronistic as it is, is therefore not entirely out of place as a political allusion. Nero, who in the film has already proven to be an enemy of the Christians, can therefore be interpreted as an opponent of socialist and workers’ dreams. The double opposition both to Christians and to socialists was especially salient.
in Italy around the turn of the century when the liberal government banned a number of Catholic and socialist organizations as subversive and arrested activists. The conflict went back to the unification of Italy in 1861 when most of the former Church territory was incorporated into the new secular state. There followed years of heightened tension, with the Vatican refusing to recognize the Italian state. At the turn of the century, however, Catholic organizations tried increasingly to regain political influence in public life. At the same time, the emerging Socialist International posed a different kind of threat to the liberal government.

In combining Christian baptism and the worker’s symbol, the film lumps together the diverse groups affected by the government’s crackdown. Nero’s persecution of the Christians therefore prefigures, for the director, what the modern Italian state would do to Catholics and socialists. At the same time, the unlikely connection between the two groups could be read as a provocative appeal to Christians to consider the radical workers as allies rather than enemies. The anti-aristocratic tendency of the 1912 film is also visible when Lygia, after nursing Vinicius’ injuries from his fight with Ursus, suddenly flees “from the love of a patrician” (this intertitle appears in both the Silent Screen and Amsterdam prints). The move comes as a surprise. After all, Lygia is herself of royal (though barbarian) descent and grew up in Rome in a wealthy patrician household where she has been treated as the daughter of the family. Consequently, class distinctions do not play a role in her musings in the novel where the girl is only concerned about the negative spiritual influence that her love for Vinicius might have on her (QV 26, 219). Crispus rebukes her for loving an Augustian but here, too, it is less his social rank than his links to the morally rotten court that troubles Crispus.

Since the 1912 film seems to regard Marcus’ patrician background as evil in itself, it is not surprising that the topic becomes problematic once Marcus and Lygia are to be married. In the novel, the event is celebrated with the manumission of all slaves serving 20 years or longer, while all other servants stay in the household and receive three pieces of gold and double rations for a week. When Marcus and Lygia retreat to Sicily at the end of the novel, they still have servants who are said to be “singing” happily (QV 72, 524) but remain, nevertheless, enslaved. In the 1912 film, however, Marcus frees all his slaves. This deviation, which is inconsistent with both the novel and historical reality – early Christians did in fact keep slaves, as the letter of Paul to Philemon shows – takes up one of the main concepts of communist and socialist thinking. In Marx’s view, slaveholder societies,
exemplified by the Roman empire – were doomed, as were the capitalist states that kept their workers in slave-like conditions. Socialist posters, for example, spread throughout Europe, depicted workers breaking their chains, alluding to the famous last sentence of the manifesto of the Communist Party, published in 1848: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite!”

The final shot of the 1912 film takes up these metaphors when it depicts a group of chained people kneeling before Christ or huddling around him. With a quick movement, Christ snaps their chains and the film ends. The political message implied by these allusions, however, is not an allegory of current political events. While the deviations from the novel invite spectators to identify with the opponents of the liberal Italian government, Nero and the Christians do not hold genuine political views. The Christians are concerned about spiritual matters while Nero follows his personal pleasures. Guazzoni himself was hardly a communist. Without official political affiliation himself, he nevertheless made various films with strong ideological messages. In 1913, before Italy’s entry into World War I, he directed *Scuola d’eroi* (“For Napoleon and France: How Heroes are made”), a film dealing with Napoleon’s campaigns and dwelling on “hostilities, bloodshed, and the role of great leaders.” Slightly more than a decade after the production of *Quo Vadis*, he was engaged in productions which spread fascist and racist views.

Even less overtly political is the 1925 Italian-German co-production shot in Italy. The first public showing took place in Rome in March of 1925. At this time, Italy had already been transformed into a dictatorship which discouraged open political opposition. The only obvious detail that links Nero to contemporary Italy is his palace, shown several times as a backdrop for orgies and magnificent receptions. Instead of creating scenery that evokes the ancient palace of Nero, the directors made the emperor’s home look like one of the many Renaissance villas owned by Italian aristocrats.

Yet even though the directors refrained from any allusions that could have been interpreted as criticism of the regime, Mussolini is known to have been unhappy about the topic because it showed a Roman emperor in an unfavorable light. Also, the spectacle of Christian martyrs valiantly dying for their beliefs was in itself enough to invite comparison to the contemporary situation in Italy in which there was considerable tension between church and state.
More explicit is the 1951 version, produced by Americans and shot in Italy. As has often been noticed, some of the props at the imperial court show fascist or quasi-fascist symbols that associate Nero with Hitler or Mussolini. Most obvious is the scene of the great fire which Nero, wearing a black cloak, watches from his palace. The scene is in fact a combination of several sources. Having the emperor stand on the roof of his palace is consistent with Cassius Dio, while the idea of the cloak is partly taken from Sienkiewicz (where Nero wears “a purple mantle” [QV 46, 355]). This detail is in turn based on Suet. Nero 38.2, who reports that Nero sang during the fire wearing his stage costume (cp. also Cassius Dio 62.18.1). While Sienkiewicz does not elaborate on the details of the cloak, the 1951 version has it embroidered with silver eagles which resemble the symbols on fascist standards. In fact, the image of a dictator who watches as his capital burns to the ground was, in 1951, still familiar to an American (and even more to a European) audience who remembered the reports from the last days of the Nazi regime. Yet, despite this blunt equation of Nero and Hitler, the 1951 version, too, does not attribute any visible political program to Nero. He promises a spectacle to the people (first in the form of the triumph of victorious legions, see below, p. 119, and later during the execution of the Christians) but there is no overarching program other than Nero’s personal pleasure. In fact, the prologue is not precise about its real target. To the image of marching legions who whip along a group of toiling slaves, the speaker announces that, in Nero’s time, “the individual is at the mercy of the state, murder replaces justice. […] There is no escape from the whip and the sword.” Obviously, this general characterization fits all totalitarian regimes but the emphasis on “the state” as the perpetrator points more to communist regimes than to fascism and national socialism with their personalized ideology. Furthermore, the scene was produced at a time when anti-communist hysteria was about to reach its peak in the United States. The third and final screenwriter on the film, John Lee Mahin, was a fervid anti-communist, and the star, Robert Taylor, was a “friendly witness” before the House Committee on Unamerican Activities in 1947. The theory of totalitarianism (which stresses similarities between right-wing and left-wing dictatorships) was available to justify blurring fascism
and communism, and the screenwriter who preceded Mahin on the film, Sonya Levien, commented, “Nero, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin are men of a kind.” Again, the blurring of fascist and communist elements in the film is possible because Nero, in both the novel and the film, does not have a clear political program (which would inevitably put him closer to one group or the other). His program is his personal career as an artist and his individual pleasure which he takes with utter disregard for human life. On the other side, the Christians stand for peace and justice, not a particular form of government. Paul advises Marcus to conquer the world by love rather than by war; presumably the line implies that American foreign policy is fundamentally benign. In the same scene, Paul challenges Marcus to free all his slaves, insisting that God intended everyone to be free. While the 1912 film associated Christianity with the manumission of slaves, in the United States, where the meaning of the Civil War and emancipation has been a central issue in national history and identity, this theme has particular resonance. Nobody could really imagine that America, however good its intentions, was conquering the world by love alone. By linking world conquest without violence to the abolition of slavery, the film provides Paul with a radical and utopian version of what Americans could recognize as their own values.

The film is deeply ambiguous about politics as a realm of action. Petronius finally regrets that he has failed to take action against Nero, so that the film seems to endorse the active political life. This would seem to make an easy point. Petronius has been too clever. Yet it concludes as Vinicius and Lygia head away to the country in a wagon. The Christians retreat from the world instead of trying to conquer it by love.

Since the 1951 version is visibly influenced by recent political events, such as the defeat of fascism and the rising tension between the US and the Soviet Union, it is instructive to compare the 2001 Polish production, realized by Jerzy Kawalerowicz some twelve years after the downfall of communism. Unlike LeRoy in the 1951 film, Kawalerowicz does not begin his version with an instructive voice-over, nor are there any obviously anachronistic symbols among the props. No eagles, let alone a hammer and sickle emblem as in the 1912 film, give the reader a clue for a contemporary reading. Instead, of all cinematic versions, the 2001 film stays closest to the novel from which it takes most of the dialogue. This faithfulness to the source is not surprising for a film produced especially for a Polish audience. It can reasonably be assumed that the spectators know the work of one
of their most famous national writers well. There had been no Polish film of *Quo Vadis?* before, so the director was not under any pressure to distinguish himself from a domestic rival and could even take pride in creating a version that reproduced the novel much more closely than any foreign version had ever done before.

There is, however, a significant change in the order of events at the end of the story. In the novel, Peter’s flight from Rome at the urging of the Christians, his vision of Christ, and his execution come immediately before the fall and suicide of Petronius and, finally, the suicide of Nero. The 2001 Polish film, on the other hand, first shows the suicide of Petronius, closely followed by that of Nero, before it finally moves on to the *Quo Vadis?* scene on the Via Appia. The apparition scene itself is closely modeled on the novel but Peter does not return to Nero’s Rome to be crucified. In fact, showing the death of the apostle at the hands of the persecutor would make little sense in this version since Nero is already dead. Instead, the 2001 film has Peter return not to ancient but to modern Rome, including twentieth-century developments, cars in the streets, and, most prominently, the dome of St. Peter’s dominating its skyline (Plate 4.1). The view of Peter and the boy Nazarius, both clad in tunics and slowly descending into the modern city, is the last scene of the film. It does not
seem to trouble the director that the spectacular shot renders the eponymous Quo Vadis? scene irrelevant – if Nero’s regime has already crumbled when Peter is on the Via Appia, it does not take a supernatural apparition to persuade him to return.

But while this order of events does not make any sense on the level of the plot, it does in fact mirror a recent political experience of the Polish nation. While the communist regime crumbled, the papacy of Polish born John Paul II persisted. Karol Wojtyła had been a declared anti-communist since his time as bishop of Krakow, and much of the vitality of Solidarity and other movements was ascribed to the support it received from the Vatican. The publication of the film in itself constituted a triumph over communism: authorities in communist Poland, wary of the Christian content of the novel, had thwarted Kawalerowicz’s earlier attempts (in the seventies and eighties) to bring Quo Vadis? to the big screen. After the fall of the Warsaw bloc, Kawalerowicz made changes to the script of the film to adapt it to the new political situation. In an interview he explained: “Perhaps this is the best moment [sc. to make the film]: similarly to those hinted at in Quo Vadis?, the changes and transformations of today concern a breakthrough period, at the border between barbarity and humanism, and the search for something to replace deteriorated values, something that will give meaning to human deeds.”

The film was first publicly shown in the Vatican on 30 August 2001 in a screening for 6,000 (mostly Polish) spectators among whom was Pope John Paul II. So this conclusion implicitly identifies Nero’s reign with the communist regime in Poland, as it links Peter and John Paul II.

In all these versions, the absence of a specific political program allows directors to portray Nero at will as a fascist (1951), a communist (1951/2001) or, even though this idea is less developed than the former two, as a member of the aristocracy with hostile feelings towards the working classes (1912, possibly 1925).

The Complex Allusions of the 1985 Miniseries

The only Quo Vadis film that puts emphasis on specific domestic affairs is the Italian miniseries of 1985, directed by Franco Rossi. This version devotes much time to the investigation of the murder of the praefectus urbis, Pedanius Secundus, in 61 CE. The novel mentions this event only briefly; it is
already over when the story begins. Petronius is said to have opposed the execution of Pedanius' slaves in a speech before Nero (QV 2, 18). According to Tacitus (Ann. 14.42), Pedanius Secundus had been killed by one of his slaves.29 In accordance with the law, which was based on the understanding that everyone who was obliged and able to help an attacked person (obliged persons include his relatives, an officer's subordinates, the slaves of a household) but failed to do so was guilty, all the slaves of his household were to be executed (Tac. Ann. 14.42):

Not long after these events, one of his own slaves murdered Pedanius Secundus, the prefect of the city. And when, according to ancient custom, all the servants who had been living under the same roof should have been executed, there was rioting, because the common people took to the streets and protected so many innocents. The senate was besieged. In the senate, those who detested excessive severity had strong feelings about it, but the majority decided that nothing should be changed.30

The people of Rome protested violently and possibly put direct pressure on the senate but the majority of senators remained inflexible.31 One of them, Cingonius Varro, even suggested that in addition to the execution of the slaves, all freed men and women of the household should be exiled. At this point the emperor intervened, preventing a tightening of the law (Tac. Ann. 14.45).

The film takes up the Tacitean report on the debate about the slaves' fate but the division runs along different lines. While in Tacitus the entire Roman populace riots to obtain mercy, in the film only the Christians are visibly concerned about the lives of the condemned. But instead of launching violent demonstrations, Paul goes to see Petronius and tries to convince him to plead with Nero for the innocents' lives. When Petronius is skeptical about the outcome, Paul tells him that now the Christians will no longer hide their faith but that he will summon them to “bear witness, in public, to our hope. We will pray for the lives of the condemned slaves, and for the salvation of the city.” What follows is an anachronistic scene of peaceful protest, in which a crowd of Christians lights candles in a public square and arranges them in the form of a giant cross. They lie down on the ground in mourning. As they fill the square, other Romans gather to watch the spectacle. Among them is Marcus Vinicius, who tries to keep Lygia from joining the protest which he finds incomprehensible. When Lygia refuses, Marcus walks away, shaking his head.
While the Christians are out to protest, the “imperial council” is summoned to the palace to discuss the case. Although the film gives it an informal atmosphere (the members are casually sitting on the stairs in the assembly room while Nero is sitting on a chair), there is no doubt that the scenery is meant to reflect senatorial assemblies as known from previous Roman films. The location of the counselors on different levels of the stairs recalls the familiar rising rows of seats in the senate house. At least two members of the council are wearing togas (while Nero is dressed in a dark robe), they rise to give a speech or to make a statement, and a member who had been informally dressed is handed a toga prætexta. The allusions serve to underline the peculiarity of the situation. In contrast to Tacitus’ account, where the senate meets to discuss the matter and the princeps only intervenes to make sure the law is not transgressed, this council is made up of Nero’s closest friends and the final decision rests entirely with Nero. (Nero himself proclaims: “I am alone. And no one will help me.”) And in contrast to Tacitus’ account, where the majority of senators votes for the execution of the slaves, in the 1985 version, the situation seems favorable for the condemned. Petronius first points out that slaves are a valuable resource and that killing them would make no more sense than killing “a herd of hard working oxen.” The others seem to agree when Tigellinus suddenly bursts into the room reporting that a Christian revolt is under way to free the slaves, with the Roman populace demanding clemency. Nero finally leaves the room and a voice solemnly proclaims that “the sentence is death.” The next scene shows the slaves being executed.

Whereas in Tacitus the outrage of the Roman people is the primary force in favor of the slaves, while the senate remains skeptical, in the 1985 series Tigellinus uses the (peaceful) protest of the Christians to turn the council’s opinion around. Although their protest is not violent, Tigellinus labels it as a “revolt” and claims that the entire populus has joined them so that they present a danger to domestic peace. If this were the case, Nero would have good reason to make an example of the slaves and reinforce public order.

The scenes that show the protest, however, give a different picture. Only Christians are actively participating in the vigil, while the non-Christians, among them Marcus Vinicius, are passive and confused bystanders, instead of making up the majority of rioters as in Tacitus. In this way, the series differentiates between Christians and non-Christians, and between the average pagan Roman citizens and the privileged members of Nero’s
council. Both the Christians and Nero’s close friends oppose the execution of the slaves, albeit for different reasons, while the ordinary citizen remains, at best, indifferent.

Since the producers had to go out of their way to find and integrate this Tacitean narrative into the Quo Vadis story, it is unlikely that the anachronisms in the protest scene (such as the candles) are due to carelessness and sloppiness. But what, then, is their point?

No earlier film set in ancient Rome included candlelight vigils of protest. The sight is strongly reminiscent of modern ways of political protest and solemn commemorations of victims of violence. While Tacitus presents the identity of Pedanius’ murderer as a fact, in the miniseries it is not so certain. The series makes Pedanius in effect the head of the secret police – he seems to be, to judge from his treatment of Lygia, an honest head of the secret police – and he has been following both the Christians and the Pisonians. After the murder of the prefect, Petronius, standing in his atrium, tells Marcus that it has been a strange night in which nobody seems to be sleeping – not even Tigellinus, who has just found the murderer of Pedanius. The next shot shows a slave being half-dragged forward, as Tigellinus tells Petronius that he has confessed and that the motive was jealousy; the slave has obviously been tortured. There is no reason to trust Tigellinus. We cannot be certain that Tigellinus himself was not behind the murder of Pedanius and that he presents the slave in order to stop Petronius’ investigation. In this case, the murder of Pedanius is the direct prelude to the burning of Rome. The entire sequence of events is wrapped in confusion; there are strong hints of conspiracy and manipulation. The atmosphere reflects that of contemporary Italy.

In the years before the film was first broadcast, Italy had experienced a prolonged period of terrorist bombings. The massacre of Piazza Fontana in Milan (December 12, 1969, 16 dead, 80 injured) and of Brescia (March 28, 1974, 8 dead, 102 injured), the attack on the train “Italicus” (August 4, 1974, 12 dead, 48 injured) and, most traumatically, the bombing of the railway station of Bologna on August 2, 1980 (89 dead, ca. 200 wounded) are, in fact, still part of the national memory. A civilian “Itavia” DC 9 aircraft mysteriously crashed near the island of Ustica on July 18, 1980, killing all 81 passengers on board. Along with the “Christmas massacre,” the bombing of train 904 on December 23, 1984 (possibly a Mafia crime), these form a series of “Italian mysteries” that were belatedly or never completely solved. Soon, though, there were rumors that at least some of these crimes had been committed not by the anarchists who were first arrested for them
but by right-wing organizations supported by the Italian secret services or by groups close to the government. Their plan, it was argued, was a “strategy of tension” designed to spread fear and insecurity which would enable them to increase political control or even to establish a police state in the name of law and order.

These theories were fueled by unsettling incidents during the investigations, including the mysterious death of a suspect and the disappearance of compromising evidence. Some of the charges have not been fully clarified until today (although the court case of Piazza Fontana was officially closed on May 3, 2005) and they were widespread when the series was made.

Consequently, the investigation of the murder of Pedanius Secundus dominates a substantial part of the series, althoughTacitus says nothing about how the murderer was identified. Nero himself puts Petronius in charge of the investigation and Petronius is, in this context, referred to as a “magistrate.” We follow the investigation with him. His work is complicated by the disappearance of the file Pedanius Secundus kept on the Christians. The prefect’s scribe has stolen it and he brings it to the Christians so they can check what the authorities found out about them. There is no historical evidence, however, that the real Petronius had anything to do with the case of Pedanius Secundus. Instead, this arrangement reflects the traditional pattern of contemporary detective stories (which typically focus on the investigator), while at the same time it caters to a specifically Italian interest in a courageous magistrate entrusted with complicated investigations, mostly against organized crime. Having this mystery plot, with its continuing suspense, dominate large parts of the story is an astute move for a miniseries.

In fact, Tigellinus’ misrepresentation of the Christians’ peaceful protest as a “revolt” and the investigations in the 1985 series are only the prelude to more wicked political schemes. During the great fire (which Tigellinus has presumably started although it is not clear if Nero explicitly ordered him to do so), Nero tells Acte quite frankly that the catastrophe was “a gift from the gods” because now he can build a new city. At the same time, all his enemies would have the people of Rome against them. Shortly before, he has opened his gardens and the imperial fountains to the homeless, as a means of winning the favor of the populace.

The imperial relief measures such as opening the gardens on the Palatine and the distribution of food are attested in the Annales. According toTacitus, they served to quell the rumors that Nero himself was an arsonist.
However, Tacitus does not describe a plan to use the fire as a pretext to execute political opponents (Ann. 15.39.2–3). This idea is also new in the reception of Quo Vadis? In the novel and in all other films (all of which assume that Nero is at least involved in the plot to burn the city), the emperor flies into a panic when the homeless and enraged people threaten to storm his palace. Shouts of “arsonist” and “murderer” from the crowd heighten his anxiety so that he finally decides to put the blame on a scapegoat to appease the furious citizens. His first choice are his own counselors, Vatinius, Vitelius, or Tigellinus, who with great difficulty manage to avert the impending danger. Only when he is unable to find a suitable scapegoat among them does Nero adopt the proposal to give the people not one, but hundreds of victims, the Christians.

Apart from changing the names of two of the potential victims (in the novel, Nero turns first on Vatinius, then on Vitelius and Tigellinus, QV 48, 370–1, while in the 1985 version he picks Scaevinus and Silvanius), the 1985 version deviates from the ancient sources, from the novel, and from the other film versions by suggesting that there is, in fact, a political plot behind the people’s unrest. Just as Nero tries to win the people’s favor after the fire by distributing goods to the homeless, so do Piso and the conspirators. At the same time, the conspirators decide to take up and spread the accusations of a mad woman who screams that Nero set her on fire and that he poisoned the wells. If they can convince the people that these allegations are true, they reason, public opinion will turn against the emperor and facilitate the conspirators’ actions.

By introducing this plotline, the 1985 series gives Nero’s investigations of alleged Christians an additional political motive. The executions are not simply the work of a reckless maniac trying to appease the justified anger of his people but part of a clever strategy to defeat an organized group of dissidents. Furthermore, the Christians, as we have seen during the discussion about Pedanius’ slaves, are in fact publicly opposing Nero when he decides to target them. Their political ideas, however, as far as they are openly expressed, are much less shaped by genuinely Christian ideas than one might expect. When Paul talks to Petronius about the slaves, he does not explain to him which Christian teachings forbid their execution. Instead, he argues that “no one lives only for himself and no one dies only for himself. Our lives are somehow connected to the lives of these innocent human beings.” Earlier in the conversation, Petronius has already remarked, as a mild reproach, that Paul has used the opportunity to “show off his
superior humanity.” Paul does not object. Although his plan for the protest includes only the Christians, both men seem to agree that there is a common concept of “humanity” to which people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds can refer. This non-denominational approach to the question allows modern spectators from various backgrounds to identify with the issue. After all, the human rights movement, which gained strength from the end of the sixties onward, attracted a variety of people with different political and religious affiliations.38

In Tacitus, the famous jurist C. Cassius Longinus urges that the slaves be executed because some of them must have been complicit and because the threat of execution is necessary so that slaves will make every effort to protect their masters. For an Italian audience, however, the slaves’ executions would evoke mass executions of innocents in reprisals which are recent historical experience in Italy and remembered vividly. The most prominent was the shooting of 335 Italians in the Fosse Ardeatine near Rome in March 1944, after partisans had killed 32 members of a South Tyrolian police battalion stationed in Rome. While any viewer of the miniseries can respond to the injustice of the slaves’ execution, the strong emphasis on the reprisal may connect it, for the Italian spectator, to such events in national history.

The 1985 miniseries complicates the political situation described in the novel by introducing the Pisonian conspiracy as an additional storyline that combines elements from the novel and from Tacitus (Ann. 15.48–16.13). It then skillfully intertwines them with the original threads of the novel.39 While the novel refers to the conspirators occasionally and mentions their violent end (QV 64, 490–2; QV 71, 522), it does not narrate these at any length. Sienkiewicz’s novel has no place for serious opposition to Nero apart from the Christians, whose resistance is internal and has no political dimension.40 The 1985 series, on the other hand, where the Christian way of life includes an attempt to actively influence politics, does not divide its characters into politically passive, morally good Christians who represent the future, and the politically active, corrupt pagans who belong to the past. Instead, both Christians and pagan nobility are politically engaged. As the discussion about the slaves of Pedanius Secundus shows, the results are similar. The difference lies in their motives. While the Christians refer to a concept of humanity that includes all classes and races, the pagan nobles of the film think economically, or pretend to (Petronius’ economic argument masks his true feelings).
As we have seen, this presentation of the events is incongruent with historical evidence. In the 1985 version, however, it creates an atmosphere in which Roman nobles can plot extensively against Nero without endangering the pagan–Christian contrast. Both Christians and the pagan conspirators wish for the downfall of Nero but, just as in the case of the condemned slaves, they do so for different reasons. For the conspirators, Nero violates the ideals of the Roman state while, for the Christians, he violates the laws of humankind along with divine laws. The outward convergence of the two groups’ goals is emphasized, in the film, by additional details that link some of the Christians, if only indirectly, to the conspirators.

The plotline of the conspiracy is built up carefully. In the first episode, Marcus Vinicius delivers a letter from his commander Corbulo to Aulus Plautius urging him to attend a dinner at the house of C. Calpurnius Piso for the eve of the next Kalends. Aulus, apparently guessing the goal of the meeting, writes to Petronius to make sure that he too will be there. Petronius refuses, because Nero is already suspicious, and the conspiracy begins without him.

However, the conspirators hesitate for a long time. They discuss options for the succession to Nero and try in vain to persuade Seneca to accept this task. The miniseries deviates from its source for Epicharis (Tacitus, Ann. 15.51) to make her the operator of a brothel used by the conspirators to stay in contact with each other. She is one of the last people who have seen the murdered Pedanius Secundus alive and Petronius goes to her house to question her. (He knows her well already, and she has provided material for the Satyricon.) Piso confesses their plan to assassinate Nero to Petronius after Petronius has questioned Epicharis. Petronius, while not betraying the plot, cannot bring himself to participate in it either. His contact is never openly held against him since the investigation of the murder explains his meeting with Epicharis. On the level of the narrative, however, the encounter helps to connect the three historically unrelated topics that dominate the plot (the fate of the Christians, the murder of Pedanius, and the Pisonian conspiracy).

Despite their lengthy preparations, however, the conspirators do not act until the great fire when it becomes evident that Tigellinus is using the persecution of the Christians as a pretext to get rid of his own enemies within the nobility. Although the conspirators are deeply divided over the form of a future government and their only common candidate, Seneca, refuses to become emperor, they finally decide to act. Fearing for their own
lives, they stage an assassination attempt which has, however, no historical basis (according to Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.54–6, the plot was discovered before the conspirators could take action). When Nero announces his plan to travel to Greece, they surround him, beseeching him not to leave Rome, and then try to stab him. The scenario is modeled on the assassination of Julius Caesar but alludes to its cinematic versions rather than to historical sources. Just like Caesar’s cinematic killing, the attack is staged in the center of power (the senate house and the palace) with the conspirators first surrounding the emperor, pretending to make a petition, and then attacking him with a knife from behind.41

Although Petronius is not involved in this plot, the love affair between his nephew Marcus Vinicius and Lygia makes him vulnerable to the schemes of Tigellinus. As early as in the second episode, Pedanius Secundus had warned Petronius that Vinicius could be used as a weapon against him in the struggle for power at court. This fear becomes a reality after Lygia is arrested during the persecution of the Christians and Marcus is forced to approach Tigellinus for help. Tigellinus suggests that in return for her freedom Marcus spy on his uncle and observe his relationship with the conspirators. The crucial character linking the plotline of the conspirators to that of the Christians is Aulus Plautius who has contacts both in the political opposition and (through his wife) among the Christians chosen by Tigellinus and Nero as scapegoats.

Religious accusation as a means to eliminate political enemies is, in the 1985 series, a preferred weapon of Tigellinus. Early on, he tries, with some success, to compromise Aulus Plautius by accusing his wife Pomponia of atheism and hence disloyalty to the Roman state (see p. 61 f.). He then repeats this pattern on a larger scale when he proposes the Christians as scapegoats for the great fire, averting the danger from himself and creating an opportunity to have his political enemies arrested.

Since in the 1985 series the persecution is already under way when the Pisonians undertake their assassination attempt, the incident does not divert Nero’s attention from the Christians. Instead, the emperor interprets his survival as a divine “sign of benevolence and an order” and vows in gratitude to cleanse the city “of sin and evil.” The next scene shows the Christians being killed by lions in the arena.

Not surprisingly, the Christians’ arrest and execution is a gory spectacle in all versions of *Quo Vadis*. Reviewers of the novel criticized its detailed description of people being crucified, burnt alive or mauled by lions, but the directors of the films felt justified in creating graphic and
blood-curdling scenes.\textsuperscript{42} In the 1912 version, the Christians are whipped into the arena and charged by the beasts. Shortly afterwards, the lions are seen eating the bloody leftovers of the victims. In the 1925 film lions in the arena hunt down the condemned and only Aulus manages to escape by climbing hand-over-hand on a garland to safety.\textsuperscript{43} In the 1951 version, the camera rests on Aulus Plautius’ face as he watched in horror, from his prison cell, his wife being killed by wild beasts. In the 2001 Polish version, lions snatch babies from their mothers’ arms.

While all these films indulge in gore and pathos, the 1985 version gives the events a particularly sinister atmosphere. All executions take place at night while in the novel and the other films only the burning of people at the stake takes place after dusk (a detail derived from Tacitus).\textsuperscript{44} The crucifixions in the arena, the mauling by lions and Ursus’ fight with the bull, on the other hand, are set during the day, the normal time for a Roman spectacle in the amphitheater. And Tacitus reports that those condemned to be killed by ferocious dogs were dressed in the skins of wild animals (\textit{ferarum tergis}, Tac. \textit{Ann.} 15.44), a detail taken up by Sienkiewicz (\textit{QV} 55, 431).\textsuperscript{45} The Christians of the 1985 series, however, are covered with sheepskins and smeared with sheep blood while the bleating of sheep is heard in the background (see Plate 4.2). Chilo runs around admonishing the guards preparing the victims to “be quick” and to “hurry,” a male voice shouts “keep them moving,” and a soldier with a shiny black helmet and a black cloak watches the scene barking “Faster! faster!” as the victims are rushed into a makeshift arena. Shortly before, Marcus finds Lygia in her

\textbf{Plate 4.2} Christians in sheepskins. Source: 1985. Producer: Elio Scardamaglia/Francesco Scardamaglia, Leone Film s.r.l.

\begin{quote}
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solitary prison cell with her hair cut short by the guards. While he is convinced that it is a hygienic measure, she is certain that she is being prepared for worse things to come (on which she does not elaborate).

While all these details are in themselves not necessarily significant, their ensemble creates an atmosphere that brings to mind details from the Holocaust. In toga films, including other adaptations of *Quo Vadis?*, Roman soldiers and guards as a rule wear silver helmets and white or red tunics. In the 1951 film, the praetorians in the arena scene wear black while the “good” soldiers wear red and white.66 The 1985 series carries this color symbolism further. The praetorians wear a singular combination of shiny black helmets and black cloaks, matching the black color of SS uniforms and the “black shirts” characteristic of fascist Italy. Similarly, the change from the Tacitean skins of wild beasts to those of sheep characterizes the Christians as helpless victims while evoking the biblical phrase of the innocent who perish “like sheep being led to slaughter.”47 The term has often been used in connection with the victims of the Holocaust. Most famously, the Jewish FPO resistance group in the Vilna ghetto lead by Abba Kovner in 1941–2 called on the inhabitants to take up arms and not let themselves be killed “like sheep.”48 The metaphor has since become a well-known term in the discussion of Jewish resistance or resignation during the Holocaust. But while the comparison between human victims and sheep is normally used polemically to denounce passivity, there is no hint of a polemic subtext in the film sequence.

This could be partly because, in Christian tradition, the metaphor of “sheep” or “lamb” is often used for the suffering Christ and carries no negative associations.49 The novel employs “Lamb” on many occasions as a synonym for Christ (e.g., *QV* 8, 78; *QV* 66, 503). But while there is no criticism of the Christians’ passivity in the film, their behavior does not resemble the death of Jesus or heroic deaths of the martyrs in other *Quo Vadis* films either. In most films, the condemned are seen kneeling down in prayer once they are out in the arena (1925, 1951), or singing hymns that outdo the roar of the wild beasts (1951 and 2001). Only in the 1912 film does it seem that panic and chaos prevail but the victims are seen from a distance only and some of their gestures may indicate desperate prayer. Except for the crucified Crispus and Aulus Plautius, they usually do not curse or reproach Nero or the spectators, and Glaucus, following Jesus’ example, even forgives Chilo before dying at the stake. And although the victims often scream with pain, they usually try to hide their fear and do
not beg for mercy. (The exception is a woman burned in the 1925 version whose pleas highlight the stoicism of the others.) The gore of the scenes is thus matched by the stoic and proud attitude of the victims who usually have some time to brace themselves for the execution. In the 1951 film, prisoners, among them Peter, are crammed into mass cells close to the arena where they can partly watch the events and comfort each other. In the 1985 series, on the other hand, the victims are broken up into small groups without a spiritual leader and held in complete darkness at the order of Tigellinus. They cannot watch events outside the prison and remain unaware of their specific fate. When they are taken out at night and rushed to the arena, they are too confused and terrified to behave heroically.

However, in the context of the 1985 series, the palpable fear of the victims does not blemish their image as martyrs. Unlike the Christians in the novel and the other film versions, each of them has already endured an interrogation by Tigellinus in which those who renounced Christianity were immediately released. In the interrogation scene, some of the accused are seen desecrating crosses or offering incense to the gods of Rome. All those who are condemned to death have therefore already proven their courage and determination.

At the same time, the option to renounce their faith and go free sets the procedure apart from the subtext of the Holocaust when the victims were classified as Jews primarily on the basis of their ancestry, not their religious affiliation. Similarly, gypsies, homosexuals, and mentally ill people could not evade their deportation by declaring loyalty to the national socialist ideology. Likewise, arrested political opponents could not win freedom by a simple gesture of loyalty as can the Christians in the 1985 series. There is, therefore, more than one subtext at work here. The history of political and religious persecution offers many parallels from which the viewer can select.

The parallels between the Christians and victims of the Holocaust in the 1985 version invite attention to this theme in the other postwar versions. The 1951 version and the film of 2001, however, do not use the Holocaust as a significant subtext. The 1951 version includes one short sentence that can be associated with the Holocaust. When Petronius warns Nero that condemning the Christians would mean to condemn himself in the eyes of history, Nero answers that “when I have finished with these Christians, Petronius, history will not be sure that they ever existed.” But the topic is not further developed, even though parallels between Nero and Hitler/
Mussolini are obvious in other scenes, and Nero is wearing his prodigious black cloak with silver eagles during the conversation with Petronius. This reluctance to develop the Holocaust as a subtext, although this line seems to indicate that the screenwriters considered it, may be surprising now but it corresponds to a general reluctance both in American Jewish and non-Jewish circles of the fifties to address the Holocaust publicly. At any rate, public discussion of the Holocaust really began, in America, only with the capture of Adolf Eichmann in 1960, and was fueled by Hannah Arendt’s hotly debated report of 1963 about his Jerusalem trial.

Since the 2001 Polish film generally stays very close to the novel, the spectator does not expect any subtext except that of the novel: Lygia and Ursus represent Poland, and the marriage of Lygia and Marcus unites Roman cultivation with Polish vigor and virtue. Although nothing in the presentation of the plot prepares the spectator for the final scenes, in which the fall of Nero suddenly becomes the fall of communism and the survival of the Christian faith the survival of the Polish pope, for the Polish audience this modern subtext would not be disturbing since the novel itself is a symbol of Polish culture. In this context, the suffering Christians suggest the sufferings of the Polish church and of Poland itself, as they did for Sienkiewicz, and the film adapts the old symbolism to contemporary circumstances. On the other hand, the ongoing tensions between Catholic Poles and the world Jewish community over the memory of the Holocaust, which had been public and acute as recently as the “War of the Crosses” in 1998–9, made the Holocaust an allusion that the Polish version of 2001 would certainly avoid.

In the 1985 series, the allusions in the persecution sequence are further enriched by the presence of a collegium of Roman priests. Although they are not conducting the interrogation of suspects themselves, they are shown several times in close-up, watching the scene. When reporting to Nero about the trials, Tigellinus urges the emperor to attend the interrogations in person as is befitting for the pontifex maximus. In the series, the reason for the religious coloring of the persecution is Nero’s solemn vow to “offer up a sacrifice to the gods.” Historically, there is some evidence that the execution of the Christians had a religious component. There is, however, no evidence in Nero’s time for the type of interrogation staged by Tigellinus. The closest parallel is the famous letter of Pliny the Younger (then governor of the eastern province of Bithynia) written in 110 or 111 CE to the emperor Trajan (Pliny Ep. 10.96). It is the earliest testimony for Roman legal procedures against Christians. Asking the emperor for advice, Pliny
describes how he routinely acquits defendants who deny being Christians if they pray to the gods in his presence, make an offering of incense and wine to the statue of the emperor, and curse Christ. Those who confess to being Christians are interrogated several times and executed if they refuse to renounce. If they are Roman citizens, they are registered and deported to Rome. The emperor agrees with this procedure (Ep. 97), and compulsory sacrifice to the Roman emperor remained a staple of persecutions of Christians under later rulers as well.

The pressure on the defendants to perform religious rituals contradicting Christianity is taken up by the film. But while the historical trials were controlled by the secular authorities, in the film the secular interrogator Tigellinus is supervised by the group of pagan priests. Tigellinus also reports back to Nero whose role as chief priest is emphasized. The involvement of religious authorities is possibly meant to bring up the connotation of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century inquisition, prosecuting cases of heresy. In these processes, too, religious and secular authorities would work together, with the religious prosecution usually investigating the charges and the secular authority executing the sentences. However, the topic is not developed. If the scene is meant to induce criticism of inquisitorial practices in later periods in church history, it does so only briefly and superficially. Rather, the special circumstances of Tigellinus’ trials serve to set the atmosphere for the upcoming execution by combining familiar elements from historical persecutions of different times and places likely to convey feelings of terror, helplessness, and injustice.

Furthermore, the trial and the executions are in the 1985 series directly linked to the Pisonian conspiracy which had played no role in the novel and the other film versions of the persecution. Immediately before the arena scene, the conspirators in the 1985 series have staged their failed attack on Nero, leading the emperor to believe that he was under divine protection. Although the Christians have been singled out already as scapegoats for the great fire, the emperor now solemnly proclaims that he will express his gratitude to the gods and consequently stages the killings as a religious spectacle under the supervision of Roman priests. The wording of Nero’s pledge, vowing to “purify our city and cleanse it of sin and of the evil that threatens and corrupts it” and to “destroy all the enemies of Rome” contains elements that can be found in fascist rhetoric. In the fall of 1922, a month before the “March on Rome” (during which the fascists seized power), Mussolini gave a speech in the northern city of Udine, declaring
that “now we aspire to make of Rome the city of our spirit, a city purged, cleansed of all the elements that have corrupted and violated her.”

In Nazi Germany, too, the deportation and killing of unwelcome people, especially Jews, was referred to as a “cleansing” of the country (see Ehlich 1989: 115–16). Finally, the promise to “to offer up a sacrifice of atonement to the gods” evokes the metaphor of a sacrifice that is completely burned, from which the term “Holocaust” is derived.

If the persecution of the Christians is read in the context of the Nazi regime, the Pisonian conspiracy might be interpreted as an allusion to the conspirators around Claus Graf Schenk von Stauffenberg plotting against Hitler in 1944. The parallel is suggested by several details found in the film but not in the Tacitean report on which it is otherwise based. The historical Pisonian conspiracy never managed to stage an assassination attempt because the assassin made ostentatious preparations that made one of his slaves suspect him and betray him (Tacitus Ann. 15.54–6).

The conspirators in the film – all from Nero’s inner circle – take advantage of an official meeting in the palace to approach Nero and stab him; but Acte gets in their way and is fatally wounded while the dictator escapes unharmed (for the implications of this scene for the role of women, see p. 79). One of the conspirators is then seen being killed by Nero’s defenders. The historical Piso committed suicide after the conspiracy was discovered.

In the assassination attempt of July 20, 1944, Stauffenberg, then colonel in the German General Staff, managed to place a bomb under the map table in the Wolfsschanze headquarters (in East Prussia) where Hitler and twenty-three of his highest officials were having a strategic meeting. Around noon, the explosion went off at close range, killing four people but wounding the dictator only lightly. Stauffenberg had left the room under a pretense and, believing that the plan had succeeded, he headed to Berlin where the other conspirators – mostly military men from noble families – were supposed to take power. But contradictory reports about Hitler’s fate made them hesitate. When the dictator’s survival was announced around 5 pm, support for the conspirators broke down. Stauffenberg and three others were arrested by troops loyal to Hitler and shot the same night. A fifth conspirator was ordered to commit suicide and shot when the attempt failed.

In the following months, more than 110 death sentences were handed down, followed by thousands of arrests. On the day after the attack, Hitler
gave a radio speech describing his close escape and stating: “This I consider to be confirmation of the task given to me by Providence to continue in pursuit of the aim of my life as I have done hitherto.” He then vows to “mercilessly exterminate” all enemies. The same line of thought is expressed by Nero dictating a solemn speech, declaring that “I [. . .] give thanks to the gods for preserving my life and my reign. I receive this sign of benevolence as an order.” Key words of this speech are later repeated to the spectators during the execution of the Christians.

On the other hand, there are significant differences between the two events that forbid a reading of the scene as a straightforward allegory. In the film, the conspirators are virtually unable to agree on a government to replace Nero, as Seneca points out in a secret meeting in the countryside. There seems to be no overarching goal except to eliminate Nero and get rid of Tigellinus. The members of the July plot, on the other hand, had set up a shadow government when they started their attack and had, for a long time, worked on plans that would make a new democratic government legal once Hitler was eliminated. Furthermore, there are hints that the conspirators were motivated by a mixture of strategic and idealistic motives. If the assassination attempt succeeded, the new German government would, in their reckoning, be able to negotiate with the allies. The opinions about the goal of such negotiations varied but it was hoped that the country might avoid total defeat which was, in July 1944, already obvious, at least to the military leaders. If the attempt failed, their deaths would prove that not all of the German people supported the regime and set an example for a better future.

These differences, partly due to the different political situation (unlike Germany in 1944, Nero’s Rome was not involved in a devastating war) do not hinder the reading of the film. Like the other cinematic versions, the 1985 series combines several clues, not all of which need to be grasped for the story to make sense. Although by 1985 many of the spectators of the miniseries were presumably aware of the failed July plot – in Italy, books had been published on this topic from the fifties onwards (see Ritter 1963) – the scenes are in fact understandable without precise historical knowledge. Even those who do not make the connection to the Nazi regime may well recognize the allusion to the assassination of Caesar. And even those who fail to do so are able to appreciate the attempt to remove a bloodthirsty emperor. In this way, the producers create layers of meaning, keeping the series attractive and meaningful to as large a group of spectators as possible.
But even though it is politically ambitious, the 1985 version is careful not to lose contact with the ancient historians on whose work Sienkiewicz based his novel. We can get a glimpse of the series’ reading of Tacitus (and Suetonius) by considering the omens that serve, in Tacitus’ narrative and in the 1985 series, to prepare the account of the Pisonian conspiracy but are absent from Sienkiewicz’s novel. They include the appearance of a comet and the birth of humans and animals with two heads (Tac. Ann. 15.47). Both omens are reported to Nero and interpreted as predicting a threat to his reign. A third portent, a deformed calf that had “a head on its leg” and was prematurely born by the wayside in the region of Placentia (modern Piacenza in Northern Italy) was believed by the *haruspices* to foretell a failed revolution. In the following chapters, Tacitus narrates the activities of the conspirators and their failure. In the 1985 series, however, the omen that foreshadows a failure of the plot is left out, while the two threatening portents are given a double meaning that connects them both to political intrigues and to the Christians. When Nero consults his astrologer Balbillus about the comet, Balbillus tells him to beware “an enemy among friends.”

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The film uses a similar technique when Nero has the portentous calf examined. The priests interpret it for him as a sign “that some hidden force is seeking dominion over the whole world.” A pan shot reveals Petronius waiting calmly in the background, suggesting a connection...
between the unfavorable omen and Nero’s closest counselor. Again, the perspective is most likely Nero’s. The connection to the next scene, however, is set up in a peculiar way that refers the viewer to the Christians. The last shot of the omen scene shows the two heads of the dead calf in close-up, looking to the right, and then, after a cut, at almost the same angle, the heads of two white marble horses, also in close-up and looking to the right. From the marble horses, the camera then moves on to the head of a real white horse, standing nearby, again looking to the right and shown from almost the same angle. This horse belongs to a Christian, who is about to set off for Corinth to deliver a message to Paul from the evangelist Mark who has temporarily run out of material for his book. When mounting his horse, the messenger declares that “the words of Jesus shall not be lost.”

The film’s juxtaposition of the political intrigue about which Nero is repeatedly warned and the Christian movement emphasizes the contrast between the two groups opposed to the emperor. While the conspirators aim at a single political act (the elimination of Nero), the Christian community – at this point of no concern to the emperor – envisages a more complex change that involves people from all layers of society.

On the other hand, Nero’s intuition of an imminent political danger is not at all wrong: There is a real conspiracy under way. By technically connecting this political threat to the following scenes about the Christians, the directors create some sympathy for the pagan resistance to Nero. Their wish to remove the emperor parallels the Christians’ desire to see the persecutor dethroned. Parallel short-term goals had already surfaced when the privileged noblemen of Rome had initially been inclined to spare the slaves of Pedanius Secundus, for whose life the Christians were rallying. The hint at a close contact between Seneca and Paul (a tradition of the fourth century) points in the same direction. Pagan Romans can to a certain extent share some of the Christians’ goals. Their motivation, however, is different (general “humanity” rather than devotion to a personal God) and their engagement seems to require a philosophical education which is limited to the privileged layers of society, even though they do not actually display an interest in philosophy. The Christians, on the other hand, acquire their “humanitarian” attitude not through education but through the teachings of the apostles, the most prominent of whom, Peter, is actually illiterate. This kind of wisdom is available for Romans of all social and educational
backgrounds, and even to foreigners who do not have any connection to traditional Roman values.

In this respect, the foreigners who constitute the majority of the Christians do in fact pose a threat to the Roman establishment. Petronius' mild reproach in his discussion with Paul that the apostle “does not leave out any occasion to show off his superior humanity” touches therefore on a sensitive point. A foreign religion that encourages its members to concern themselves with Roman politics is, after all, a potential problem not only for Nero, but for every future emperor. It is noteworthy, therefore, that Paul’s captivity and trial in Rome as attested in Acts are mentioned only briefly in the novel (QV 16, 139) and in one of the films. According to Acts 26, he was accused of stirring political unrest among the populace of Jerusalem and used his right as a Roman citizen to appeal directly to the emperor. He was then brought to Rome as a prisoner and spent some time in custody. The sources are not clear about when he was tried and how the trial ended. While some scholars assume that he was sentenced to death immediately, others maintain that he was first acquitted and allowed to preach (this is what Acts 28:31 implies) but was arrested again later and finally executed under unknown circumstances.

Although the events that lead to his arrest take place outside Rome and although Paul is shown as a free man for most of the Quo Vadis plot, these alone are not convincing reasons why his appearance before the imperial court (which is almost certainly a historical fact) should not be mentioned in the 1985 series. When Roman authorities in the 1985 series search for the Christian Iseas, for example, we are immediately informed that he is accused of murdering a Roman sentry in Judea. Furthermore, the conversation between Petronius and Paul about the slaves suggests that Petronius knows the apostle only from hearsay (Seneca had talked about him, but the information doesn't seem to be detailed). This implies that Paul had probably not appeared before the imperial court for, if he had, Petronius would probably have had more intimate knowledge.

By leaving out Paul’s appearance before the imperial court, the director avoids further complications of the plot. If Nero had investigated Paul in the past and was well informed about the Christians, it would have been hard to present the idea of offering the Christians as scapegoats as a surprise solution to Nero’s problems.
Foreign Policy in the Films

The domestic political problems are, in the 1985 version, closely intertwined with Roman foreign politics. The Christians who are politically active in the city are said to be mostly immigrants from Judea and Palestine. When Roman authorities first try to arrest one of their sympathizers, the scribe Iseas, it is not because of some subversive cult or superstition but because he is a suspect in the murder of a Roman sentry in Judea. Furthermore, when Pedanius Secundus receives orders to investigate the Christian movement, said to be gaining growing support among noble Roman families, he is fully aware that it “is a complicated matter because it affects our situation within the kingdom of Judea.” What the Roman position in Judea is or why Judeans came to Rome remains vague but the repeated stress on the lowly and dirty work they accept and which no Roman would do suggests that economic reasons have forced them to leave their country. The ongoing concern among Roman magistrates in the 1985 series that investigation of the Christians might cause problems for Roman interests abroad suggests that these immigrants have not fully severed ties to their homeland. This is expressed by Petronius when Paul approaches him about the impending execution of Pedanius’ slaves. “I know you are a Jew,” Petronius tells him, “and a Roman citizen. Now I hear that one of your teachers said that ‘you cannot serve two masters.’ Whom do you serve, Paul of Tarsus? The Romans or the Jews?” The term “Jew” as used by Petronius does not point to a religious but rather to an ethnic affiliation and therefore raises the question of a foreign-born citizen’s loyalty to the Roman state. Since the film conveys the impression that Paul is an immigrant, he may be considered a representative of the newly arrived residents of Rome.

The influx of foreigners is a prominent topic throughout the 1985 series, starting with the first voice-over of Petronius’ letter to Vinicius. Only in the case of Christian immigrants from Judea, however, is this problem linked to current Roman foreign policy. Lygia’s tribal affiliation, on the other hand, is of no concern: During an interrogation, Pedanius Secundus tells her that, after the defeat which left her as a hostage in Roman hands, her kinsmen quit their former land close to the Roman border and disappeared into the northern woods. This information is also found in the novel but is there given by Marcus Vinicius when he first tells Petronius about his love (QV 1, 8–9).
Since the Lygians are defeated, Lygia’s barbarian ancestry is not as threatening as the Christians from unruly Judea are. Likewise, the members of Nero’s council in the 1985 series briefly mention Tiridates of Armenia but there is no evidence that any Armenian has immigrated to Rome, and the well-attested crowning of this eastern king by Nero in 63 CE (see Tac. Ann. 15.29) is left out.

The allusions to foreign politics are not found in other film versions and leave the viewer with the impression that the Roman empire has relationships with several foreign countries. However, the nature of these relationships remains mysterious and seems to affect Roman daily life only when large numbers of immigrants pour into the city. Several aspects may be of relevance here for the 1985 Italian spectator of the miniseries. On the one hand, there is, clearly, the problem of immigrants who started to arrive in Italy at the beginning of the seventies. A considerable number were women from Catholic countries (especially South America and the Philippines) or from Catholic minorities, working as maids and brought to Italy by church organizations. At the same time, immigrants arrived from Tunisia, from the former Italian colonies Eritrea and Ethiopia and from neighboring Yugoslavia. They were employed as unskilled, often illegal workers in a variety of jobs, the Tunisians particularly as fishermen in Sicily and the Yugoslavs as construction workers in the northern province of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, parts of which had been devastated by the earthquake of 1976. During the eighties, finally, an increasing number of Moroccans migrated to Italy, earning their living as street-vendors.

The deliberate Christian immigration, temporary housing, unhygienic living conditions, and lowly work which are prominent in the 1985 series correspond, therefore, to experiences in the life of contemporary Italy. On the other hand, while immigrants were being perceived as a social problem when the 1985 series was made, and were sometimes eyed with open suspicion, they were not accused of actually plotting against the state or stirring political unrest, as are the Christians in the series. Apart from obvious parallels in Italian social and political life, there must therefore be a second layer here which points more to national and international politics of the time. Of the political “mysteries” that shook Italy at the time, only the crash of the airplane at Ustica had undeniable international implications. However, there were soon rumors that foreign groups or even secret services had been involved in the terrorist attacks. Since the alleged connection between the Christians, their political activities within Rome, and Roman foreign politics are never fully explained in the film, there is no way
the spectator can unequivocally connect them to a specific political event or movement in recent history. But a spectator can readily respond to a combination of peculiar elements that evoke the general contemporary atmosphere: a sense of danger fueled by a national tragedy, secret political activists, terrorism of various ideological backgrounds, possible foreign involvement, and the obscure role of certain circles close to the government.  

In the book and all the other films, on the other hand, foreign politics are mainly confined to military endeavors. At the beginning of the book, Marcus Vinicius returns to Rome after a campaign in the east and finds his native city changed. His discussion with Petronius about Corbulo’s activities provides the reader with a superficial impression of the difficult situation on the eastern borders (QV 1, 2–3). Petronius completes the picture with a complaint about the situation at the imperial court (QV 1, 6–7). Foreign affairs and the respective laws also play a crucial role when Petronius, to help Marcus in his desperate love affair, has Lygia transferred to Nero’s palace, on the grounds that foreign hostages belong to the emperor (QV 6, 45). Foreign politics come up again when legions revolt and proclaim the successful general Galba their leader. Galba then advances on Rome and ends Nero’s reign.

The Military in the 1951 Version

The military forces engaged far away from the capital seem to be the only part of the Roman political system that functions normally in the novel. The troops fight bravely and their generals uphold Roman virtue. Two of the most sympathetic characters of the novel and the films, Marcus Vinicius and Aulus Plautius, come from a military background.

The contrast between valiant officers fighting abroad and the degenerate life in Rome is taken up by all films but it is most conspicuous in the American version of 1951. In contrast to the novel, where Marcus Vinicius is introduced as he pays a visit to his uncle Petronius, the film shows him riding back to Rome at the head of his victorious fourteenth legion after a three-year campaign in Britain. On the outskirts of Rome, Nero’s messenger orders him to set up camp outside the city’s frontiers and to await further instructions. The soldiers, yearning for their families after a long and exhausting campaign, are furious at this injunction.
Although Marcus feels the same way, he has a protesting soldier given ten lashes before setting out to bring his soldiers’ case before the emperor. He finds Nero surrounded by his cronies, playing the lyre and at first disturbed by the commander’s arrival. After Marcus has explained his soldiers’ situation, it emerges that Nero did not mean to neglect his legions but to have them wait for a couple of hours for another victorious legion arriving from Africa. Together, they will be allowed a splendid triumph the next day to provide a spectacle for the Roman public. This triumph is the film’s first great spectacle (see Plate 4.3). Not Nero, but Tigellinus has caused the confusion, who at the emperor’s question admits that he had instructed the messenger not to give Marcus any reasons since “reasons do not belong in imperial orders.” This attitude is the first hint at the dangerous character of Tigellinus whose hunger for power will soon bring death and destruction to Petronius, to the Christians, and to the entire city.
Marcus Vinicius, on the other hand, appears as the ideal military leader. Instead of giving in to his own impulses and the demands of the soldiers, he makes sure that the chain of order is respected even where he does not agree with it. At the same time, he stands up valiantly yet respectfully to the emperor for the needs of the lowliest of his soldiers. Personal courage, compassion for the men under one's command, and respect for law and order are in fact highly praised by Roman writers. The general who sleeps on the bare soil like his men and shares their simple rations is a stock motif in Roman literature, with Hannibal and Marius as the most prominent examples. Likewise, the stern commander who punishes transgressions of orders even if their result is favorable for the Romans is sometimes referred to approvingly: the most famous example is T. Manlius Torquatus, a commander in the war against the Gauls who had his own son executed for engaging enemy troops in battle without permission (see Sall. Cat. 52.30 who gives his name as A. Manlius Torquatus).

Although the virtues displayed by Marcus in the 1951 version are in accordance with Roman values, the scene clearly points to recent events. Marcus' three-year stay in Britain, for example, is not found in the novel or in the other film versions, in which he comes back from a three-years campaign at the Parthian border under Corbulo (who is not mentioned in the 1951 version at all). The Romans, while stationed within the empire, undertook several punitive excursions into hostile territory which finally led to the defeat of the Parthians. The last Roman victory in Britain, on the other hand, was achieved against the Iceni tribe in 61, approximately three years before the plot of the film (see Tacitus, Ann. 14.31). The fourteenth legion was involved in the fighting. According to Suetonius (Nero 18), around the same time, Nero planned to withdraw completely from Britain (on this topic compare De Filippis Cappai 1992). The return from Britain has no historical basis. Similarly, there was no military victory in Africa under Nero that a returning legion could celebrate. An expedition sent out in 61 CE along the Nile to Sudan had very few members, among them only two Roman officers (see Grant 1970: 132–4).

A successful campaign in Britain had been undertaken by Aulus Plautius Silvanus during the reign of Claudius in 43 CE (see the short remark in Tac. Ann. 13.32), concluding with an ovatio (a celebration less lavish than a triumph – triumphs were reserved for the imperial family) upon his return to Rome in 47 CE. The novel, although not dwelling extensively on Plautius' campaigns, refers briefly to the British king Calicratus who was brought to Rome as a prisoner (QV 25, 204). The 1951 film stresses that Plautius is a
“retired general,” but does not mention his British campaign – indeed, Marcus praises the courage of “your barbarous Britons” in a way that suggests Plautius has not fought Britons. So the transfer of Marcus’ military exploits from Parthia to Britain does not serve to sharpen the contrast between Marcus’ enthusiastic boasting about his slaughter of enemies and Plautius’ admission that he has “lost his zest” for such matters.

The change from “Eastern Border” to “Britain” creates a complex connection with the events of World War II in which the US, for slightly more than three years (December 1941 to May 1945), had troops in Britain who flew air raids against Germany. Similarly, in 1951, the surrender of the Axis forces in Africa lay only a few years back (it was signed on May 13, 1943 near Tunis). Immediately after the end of World War II, the Allied victory was presented to the American public in distinctly Roman terms. On June 19, 1945, *The New York Times* reported, four million spectators witnessed a giant homecoming parade in New York “such as Rome never gave a conquering Caesar” (*NYT* June 20, 1945, p. 1). A day before, General Eisenhower had told Congress in a solemn speech that he had “seen the American proved on battlegrounds of Africa and Europe over which armies have been fighting for more than two thousand years of recorded history. None of those battlefields has seen a more worthy soldier than the trained American” (*NYT*, June 19, 1945, p. 4). Both events were well remembered by the spectators of 1951. The recent return of MacArthur from Korea could also make the triumph feel American. Yet Americans, of course, did not fight against Britain, but as an ally. When Lygia reacts to Marcus’ gleeful description of battle by saying that she can see “only the awful necessity of defending one’s home,” the film evokes the American audience’s identification with the British. As so often, the film here merges different layers of meaning.

At the same time of course, “Britain” and “Africa” represent the northern and southern border of the Roman empire, emphasizing its size, much as in Eisenhower’s speech “Europe” and “Africa” had stressed the geographical range of American war operations. In this case, the different levels of meaning within the scene enhance each other and make the underlying concept accessible even to spectators who are unaware of the actual size and geography of the Roman empire.

The homecoming scene of Marcus Vinicius presents a good example for the allusive technique employed by all the adaptations. Although they refer, on various levels, to contemporary politics, the films are not allegories. Instead, the allusions convey, in different scenes, different meanings that
may well contradict each other. For example, the image of the victorious Roman legions evoking memories of the victorious American army during World War II is combined with a flashback to the crucifixion of Jesus. The introductory voice-over declares that “thirty years before this day, a miracle occurred. On a Roman cross in Judea, a man died to make men free.” The text of the voice-over echoes the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” (“As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free”), inviting the American audience to identify with Christ as the victim of Roman violence and to see themselves as opponents of Rome. Yet immediately before, the speaker says: “Imperial Rome is the center of the empire, and undisputed master of the world. But with this power inevitably comes corruption.”

While the United States was not “undisputed master of the world” in 1951, it was the most influential nation and the world’s strongest military power. If corruption is “inevitable,” it is hard to see how the greatest power of the world can avoid it and the American audience is thus cautioned against short-sighted complacency.

Then, only a few moments later, the film invites the spectator to see Marcus Vinicius as a prototype of the (responsible and successful) American officer. Similarly, the homecoming parade evokes American military success but Nero, the supreme commander, is a fascist dictator during the great fire. The very triumph of Marcus, while conveying feelings of joy and grandeur by showing close-ups of a beaming Vinicius amidst a jubilant crowd, also includes shots that evoke carefully arranged mass scenes best known from Riefenstahl’s coverage of Nazi rallies (Plate 4.3). The connection is established not by uniform movements of masses – unlike the crowds in Triumph of the Will, for example, the spectators of the parade do not follow any visible choreography – but by the filming technique. When the scene is shown from what appears to be Nero’s perspective (he watches from a balcony), the camera is located improbably high over the crowd, allowing for an overwhelming view of the masses and their organization on the square and in the midst of the impressive architecture of Rome. The Roman salute used by Nero and Vinicius strengthens the connection to Nazi rallies. An American atmosphere is skillfully blended with bits of totalitarian ways of presentation.

Consecutive scenes can invite very different responses to closely related themes. The opening shows the “conquering legions” of Rome from their brutal side. The soldiers drive along a group of prisoners who are, in a voice-over, identified as the “helpless subjects” whom their defeated rulers “surrender to bondage.” The short flashback to the crucifixion of Jesus, who
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is brutally driven along by Roman soldiers much like the prisoners on the Appian Way, reinforces this negative view of Rome. The comparison between Jesus and the prisoner is made clear as both are shown at the moment when they fall exhausted to the ground.\textsuperscript{84} If one keeps this image in mind, the sympathetic portrayal of the fourteenth legion’s homecoming in the next scene comes as a surprise. Even though their commander sports a sword and has a soldier whipped — whip and sword were denounced as symbols of oppression a moment before — the film does not criticize him and discourages the spectator from doing so. Unlike the random abuse of prisoners, the beating is not shown and it is meant to keep up military discipline, not to inflict lasting damage. And while the prisoners cannot hope for compassion, Marcus Vinicius speaks up for his soldiers after making sure they respect his authority.

The change of attitude is achieved by a shift from impersonal to personal presentation. The opening scene shows the Roman army as an anonymous mass whose individual faces are hardly discernible. Instead, its advance is characterized by unpleasant or threatening sights (a dusty, dirty street, ragged prisoners), sounds (the pounding of drums, the hiss of scourges, shouts), and behavior (random abuse of captives). The marching legions are partly seen from the perspective of little children sitting at the side of the street which reinforces the contrast between power and helplessness. By contrast, the arrival of Marcus Vinicius in Rome is set on a sunny day in a beautiful, green landscape and accompanied by the sound of birds singing. From the green bushes two men in chariots emerge who are soon identified by name (Marcus Vinicius and his officer and friend Flavius). They smile at the sight of their native Rome and it is easy to identify with their feelings of joy and relief. “Tonight I’ll sleep at home,” Flavius declares and Marcus, with a smile, calls him “a man of the family to the bitter end” announcing that “it is not sleep I’ll be looking for.” The camera is slightly above the level of their eyes, making their appearance as unthreatening as possible. When the legion finally catches up with them, it approaches quietly in order. There is no shouting, no rattling of weapons or stamping of boots, and the soldiers do not have prisoners or booty with them. The film directs the attention of the spectator towards the pleasant experience of homecoming rather than the cruelty of war in which the soldiers have participated. As the dialogue shows, they, like Flavius, want above all to see their families. Because Marcus Vinicius is portrayed as an individual, his legion, too, is perceived as a group of individuals with human feelings and needs.
The Arrival of Galba

The coming of Galba that leads to Nero’s fall is one of the best examples of how most of the films pit the hopelessly decadent domestic politics against the unspoiled soldiers fighting abroad. Historically, the persecution of the Christians (in 64 CE) and the arrival of Galba (in 68 CE) are unrelated events. Galba, who was not related to the imperial family and held at the time the office of governor in Nova Carthago [today Cartagena in Spain] accepted offers of support from Vindex and the Gallic legions encouraging him to march on Rome and make himself emperor (Suet. Galba 9.2). His revolt succeeded. In a panic, Nero killed himself and Galba managed to defeat the prefect of the praetorians.

However, according to Suetonius, (Galba 13) “his arrival was not so welcome as it might have been, and this was apparent at the first performance in the theater: for when the actors of an Atellan farce began the familiar lines ‘Here comes Onesimus from his farm’ all the spectators at once finished the song in chorus and repeated it several times with appropriate gestures, beginning with that verse.” His reign lasted only a couple of months before he was replaced by Otho.

The novel respects the historical chronology of events by putting an unspecific period of time between the end of the persecution and Nero’s downfall. Most of the films, on the other hand, establish a direct link between the two events. In the 1912 version, Galba’s soldiers arrive during the peak of the persecution, riding straight into the arena and putting Nero and his court to flight. In the 1925 film, the populace first welcomes the rumors about Galba’s march on Rome, “for it was not war on Rome, but war on the tyrant.” Later, the news about “the mutinous legions of Gaul and Spain” even lead to the revolt of the “Metropolitan legions” under Marcus Vinicius who helps to end the arena games and chase Nero away. No such legions ever existed. There were police forces (vigiles urbani) in Rome but no armed legions were allowed within the city limits. In the novel, Marcus leads a civilian life in Sicily long before Galba comes to Rome.

The change thus strengthens Marcus Vinicius’ role and adds a local element to the uprising. Although Galba’s arrival has no open connection to the persecution (the news of the revolt that reaches Nero shortly before does not give a reason for the revolt at all), the spectator is thus left with
the impression that the general’s unexpected arrival solves the problem like a *deus ex machina*: it constitutes a just, maybe even divine, retaliation for Nero’s cruelty against the Christians.

The 1951 version strengthens the local element in the uprising even more. Galba does not come to Rome spontaneously but is invited to do so in a letter written by Marcus Vinicius and his loyal aide and signed by Petronius. It is also Marcus’ soldiers who first attack the praetorian guards, the most feared instrument of terror in Rome, as soon as they try to harm Marcus in the arena. In a long speech, Marcus then tells the people that General Galba is already on his way to Rome: “your army has risen” and “Rome is yours again.” He thus gives the people an opportunity to acclaim Galba as the new emperor, “legitimizing” his coup d’état.

This scenario, in which the people are not directly involved in Nero’s downfall, but support and acclaim those who replace him, mirrors, in a way, the idea of a democratic system in which representatives act for the populace. The dangers (namely that evil leaders abuse their power) is all too obvious in the film but at its end the film presents, in Marcus’ arena speech, the exemplary behavior of a people’s representative. Marcus’ exemplary role is underlined in one of the final scenes of the film, in which he and his loyal officer await Galba at the entrance to the city, before Marcus finally retires with Lygia to Sicily. The first and the last appearance of Marcus in military duty thus form a ring composition. At the opening of the film, he had been introduced at the outskirts of Rome as a responsible officer caring for his men and presenting a strong contrast to the brutal soldiers in the first scene. Now he is again in the outskirts of Rome, caring not only for his soldiers but for the whole populace whose new and better ruler he is about to introduce.

The hope for a more stable future as voiced by his officer might sound cynical to spectators who know that Galba’s reign lasted only a few months but the directors clearly do not assume such knowledge. Instead, the film presents history as “made by men”: if the right person comes along, he will succeed in leading the people to a better life of freedom, liberty, and justice (for the allusion to contemporary politics of the fifties, see pp. 94–5). To be sure, the hopefulness of the conclusion is tempered: Marcus comments that a truly stable government will demand a more stable faith. Yet it seems as if a better future is coming.

The 1985 series takes a different view. It is the only version which does not include the coming of Galba and Nero’s death, ending instead with the
flight of the surviving Christians from Rome to an unknown destination. It is also the only version in which the decision to let Lygia go free comes from Nero and Tigellinus, without the involvement of the spectators or armed soldiers. Nero stays in power and his idea to let the victims go free is as unpredictable as were his excesses of cruelty before.

The 1985 series is in one way more pessimistic than the novel and the other cinematic versions. Not only does the suffering of the innocent not lead to the tyrant’s downfall, it does not affect him at all. The miniseries shows a similar pessimism elsewhere when the protests against the executions of Pedanius’ slaves make the situation worse, and when the relief measures taken by Nero and by Piso after the fire are nothing but a cheap political move. This disillusioned view on life and politics seems typical for late twentieth-century Europe which (unlike America?) has lost any trust in conventional heroes.

The miniseries offers some small comfort from a historical perspective. After Ursus has defeated the bull, the camera pans slowly across Lygia who is tied to a column in a pose reminiscent of crucifixion and appears to be barely conscious. Tigellinus steps forwards to say that Lygia is to be released on Caesar’s order and, as he moves out of sight of the crowd, he says, very softly, “no one will ever understand that we were only trying to defend ourselves.” He takes up an earlier remark by Nero who had brushed aside Petronius’ earlier warnings that the accusations against the Christians were absurd and declared that “I have to defend myself.” This detail is not found in the novel and, unlike other new details in the 1985 version, it is not taken from Tacitus or Suetonius where Tigellinus is never shown with scruples of any kind. Tigellinus’ enigmatic remark suggests that, while no insight on the part of the perpetrators can be expected, the future will remember and judge them. It invites the spectator to consider Tigellinus as a historical type of the self-justifying agent of evil. He does not define which actions he sees as self-defense, so that his comment evokes the entire series of events that has led to this moment: Nero’s fears about his opponents, the setting of the fire, the following interrogations and executions. The fire is an act of terrorism while its aftermath is political or religious persecution.

It is significant, then, that in the two main political subtexts of the 1985 series, the perpetrators of atrocities claimed to be acting in self-defense. The groups linked to the secret service who detonated explosives in public squares in Italy in the sixties, seventies and eighties did so to ward off an alleged communist threat (i.e., a slide to the left of the
Italian political system): the attacks would be blamed on leftist groups who could then be suppressed more easily. (For this so-called “strategy of tension” see Ganser 2005: 6–7.) Tigellinus’ arson is likewise reminiscent of the widespread belief that the SA themselves set the Reichstag on fire in 1933 in order to blame the communists.\textsuperscript{86} Nazi propaganda consistently claimed that Jews and Bolsheviks were actively attacking Germany and that the persecution of Jews was self-defense.\textsuperscript{87} The invasion of Poland that started World War II was justified by a forged attack of Polish soldiers on the radio station of Gleiwitz, allowing Hitler to announce to the Reichstag on September 1, 1939 that the Polish army had been firing on German territory and that “now, since 5:45 AM we are shooting back.” “We are shooting back” has since become proverbial, in Germany, for military aggression. The viewer, however, does not have to bring such specific allusions to mind. Tigellinus’ tactic of committing an atrocity in order to be able to blame it on his enemies is the standard stuff of conspiracy theories, familiar in popular literature, film, and everyday life, and the claim that he was only defending himself is also familiar. It continues to be a commonplace of terrorist propaganda. The remark is hopeful insofar as it points to a future that will consider these events but, because the pattern is so familiar, it also suggests that evil is never really overcome.

The 2001 version, on the other hand, does not share the pessimism of the 1985 series. The end of the arena scene stays close to the novel. Nero frees Lygia and Marcus in the arena at the demand of the spectators, without the involvement of Galba’s or anyone else’s troops. However, it then compresses the following stretch of time, with the suicide of Petronius and the flight of Nero following shortly after the arena scene. In accordance with historical sources, the emperor is persuaded to flee by news that Galba is approaching and the simultaneous report that the senate has sentenced him to death (\textit{QV}, Epilogue 539–40; the novel delays the news of the senate’s action until the very end). Although the film does not indicate that the mutiny of the legions has anything to do with the persecution of the Christians, the closeness in time again makes Nero’s violent end appear like divine retribution. The crucial factor is again the approach of military force, not so much the senate, which turns against Nero only after military support is in sight.

Since it would have been technically easy to introduce the death of the emperor as a form of epilogue (for example by announcing with a voice-over or intertitle that it occurred several years later – a practice not
uncommon in epic films), the compression is clearly an artistic decision. The editing compresses events even more since the film cuts from the suicide of Petronius to Nero as he explodes in rage at the news of the revolt, so that Petronius’ escape from Nero seems to be another cause of his frustration. The film encourages its audience to see the work of providence in Nero’s downfall, while it avoids actually changing the sequence of events in the novel. It does alter its source, however, by ending with the spectacular shot of Peter returning from the Via Appia at the end of the film right after Nero’s death. This shot demands that time be compressed. Since the “Quo Vadis?” scene is closely linked to the persecution in Rome, it cannot be preceded by the announcement that Nero’s death occurred four years later.

At the same time, if the final shot of Peter in front of the dome of St. Peter’s likens Nero’s downfall to the downfall of communism, the idea that Rome’s own legions dethroned the emperor gains more importance. Just as Galba came from the periphery of power, so the liberation movement in Eastern Europe originated not in the center of the communist bloc but on its periphery, in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Eastern Germany.

Notes

1 Historically, the emperors had power to overrule certain laws. For imperial sentences which were not bound by law see, e.g., Bleicken 1962, esp. 66 ff., and 60 ff. for the emperor’s influence on senatorial sentences.

2 Quoted in Giergielewicz 1968: 55. For the influence of Sienkiewicz’s political ideals on the creation of Quo Vadis?, see Barron 2005.

3 In later times, the praetorians play a decisive role in choosing and supporting the new emperor. In Nero’s time, however, they had not yet assumed this power. For a brief overview of the history of the praetorian guard, see Powell 1968: 858–66 and Stöver 1994.

4 The novel and the 1985 series consistently call Poppaea’s first husband and her son “Rufius.” This form is found in Tac. Ann. 12.42 and Suet. Nero 35, but the husband also appears as Rufrius (Tac. Ann. 13.45 and 15.71) or Rufus (Tac. Ann. 16.17).

5 The choice of name may reflect the boy’s role as a possible successor to the throne since “Livia” (after Livia Augusta, Augustus’ wife) is a Julio-Claudian name.
The Polish original uses the word *augustianów* (Sienkiewicz 1930 [Polish edition]: 592). The emperors from Augustus onward had a group of quasi-official friends. These individuals were sometimes referred to as *amici* (“friends”), *comites* (“companions”) or *cohors amicorum* (“group of friends”) and are occasionally attested as such in inscriptions. See Syme 1956.

Sienkiewicz may have combined several allusions he found in the sources. Tac. *Ann.* 14.15.5 speaks of Roman knights who were called “Augustiani” and were “notable for youth and strength” (see Koestermann 1968 ad loc.). In the novel, at least two members of the Augustans are of lowly descent. Suetonius describes this group of well-born claqueurs first in *Nero* 20.3. Later, claqueurs (*plau-sores*) compare themselves to the *Augustiani* (25.1). Unlike the young men of Tacitus and Suetonius, Nero’s hangers-on in the novel and the film are at least middle-aged.

During the great fire, there are five people with Nero: Tigellinus, Tullius Senecio, Vatinius, Vitelius and Petronius, later joined by Poppaea (*QV* 48,372). Tigellinus consults separately with Seneca and Thrasea Paetus.

Cp. Pucci 2002: 594. The choreography of the scene, with axe and sickle being “revealed” and highlighted by the actors’ rather than by camera movements, is influenced by theatrical traditions. On the impact of theater on Italian cinema before World War I, see Hay 1987: 11 ff.

An acute crisis broke out on March 6 and 7, 1898, when soaring bread prices provoked strikes and riots in Milan. The government declared a state of emergency and prohibited both Catholic and socialist newspapers and associations. A large number of activists were arrested and some prominent leaders received harsh jail sentences of between three and twelve years. See Sabbatucci and Vidotto 1995: 546–7. In the general elections of 1913, the liberal party won 47.6 percent of the votes, while the Catholic party obtained only 4.2 percent. See Sabbatucci and Vidotto 1995: 603.

A strong move towards an engagement for workers’ rights had been made by the Encyclical *Rerum novarum*, published in March 1891 by Leo XIII. In the following years, the annual Catholic congresses in Italy dealt repeatedly with workers’ problems, discussing, for example, the establishment of Catholic workers’ unions.

Among the stills of the film that George Kleine, the American distributor, gave the Library of Congress, is what seems to be an alternative version of the final shot. While the version available from Silent Films International shows Christ standing before a cross comforting a group of people who kneel before him or stand beneath his arms, the Kleine shot has no cross. The Amsterdam print is missing the end.
Political Institutions, Political Subtexts

15 Sorlin 1996: 36.

16 For example, his film *La sperduta di Allah* (1928), based on the novel by Guido Milanesi, treats the failed love affair between an Italian man and an Arab woman and leads to the conclusion that members of oriental “races” are not desirable partners for marriage.

17 In fascist Italy, cinema production was less centralized and supervised than in Nazi Germany. The propaganda institute LUCE (L’Unione Cinematografica Educativa) for documentaries had been established as early as 1925 but only with Regio Decreto Legge no. 1117 at the beginning of the thirties did these films become required viewings preceding the main film in all theaters.


19 This is especially true for the struggle about the educational system which had in the past been overwhelmingly in the hands of the clergy. The fascists were anxious to either replace or at least influence church schools to their advantage.

20 Winkler 2001: 50–76.

21 In the last days of World War II, Hitler (who stayed in the relative safety of his underground bunker) gave orders to keep fighting even when Berlin lay in ruins and the Russians were already closing in. For the fire itself, director Mervyn LeRoy (born in 1900) declared that he had drawn on his childhood memories of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. LeRoy and Kleiner 1974: 8.

22 Winkler 1998: 174 compares the opening voice-over and its emphasis on slavery to the “Why we fight” series, obligatory viewing for American soldiers during World War II. The films stressed the Nazi attempt to enslave foreign nations.


26 The film aimed at an audience of ten million in Poland as well as international response; see *The Warsaw Voice* of October 14, 2001 (www.warsawvoice.pl/archiwum.phtml.1782).

27 See Verbeek 2005: 74–97. In his autobiography, Lech Walesa describes the importance of the pope’s Wednesday audiences during the state of martial law: “Everybody in Poland listened to the pope. People sat around their radios trying to tune in to the Polish programs on Radio Free Europe because they wanted to hear that their resistance to authority was morally justified.”
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28 Quoted in Mierzejewski 2001.

29 Tacitus assumes that the master had either denied him freedom after promising it, or that the two men were erotic rivals. The 1985 series does not elaborate on the motives. About the case, see Bellen 1982.

30 According to Tacitus Ann. 14.43, there were 400 slaves in the household, while the film states there were 202. It follows Tacitus in claiming that the law demanding their execution was “ancient,” while it had in reality only been introduced some 50 years before. The juridical procedure is regulated by the senatus consultum Silanianum (10 CE, amended in 11 CE) and was made harsher in 57 CE (Senatus consultum Pisonianum [or Neronianum or Claudianum, cp. Tac. Ann. 13.32]). An exception was made only when it could be demonstrated that a slave was unable to help (this included children and the handicapped, Dig. 29.5.1.32–4, l.3 pr. 7–11, slaves in detention at the time of the attack, Dig. 29.5.3.6, or slaves who were too far away from the site of the attack to take notice, Dig. 29.5.1.30, l.3.2). See Mommsen 1955: 630–1. Tacitus does not explicitly talk about children or handicapped slaves but his statement that senators pitied “the age or sex” (aetatem aut sexum, Tac. Ann. 14.45.1) implies that at least some of the condemned were either very young or very old. The film puts much emphasis on this group, showing mainly elderly people and crying children being crucified.

31 The sentence presents textual problems. F. Jacob added obsessus (“[the senate] was besieged”) – accepted by most recent editors – because he believed (probably correctly) that 14.45.1, which describes how the people make it impossible for the sentence to be carried out immediately, threatening the senate with stones and torches, refers back to this scene. See on the problem Koestermann 1963, ad loc. There is no question, however, that the protest of the people was violent. It is also clear that opinions among the senators were divided.

32 This purely economical approach reflects the way Cato the Elder (234–149 BCE) presents slavery in his book De re rustica (“On agriculture”). It may indirectly reflect the ongoing debate about the profitability of American slavery that followed W. Fogel and S. Engermann’s Time on the Cross of 1974.

33 The case remained mysterious until the journalist Andrea Purgatori revealed that the aircraft was probably shot down by a poorly aimed NATO missile and that the Italian government, at NATO’s request, tried to cover up the case. The incident was treated in the film Il muro di gomma [English title: “The Invisible Wall,” Italy, 1991, dir. Marco Risi] whose title has become a synonym for the “Italian mysteries” which were seen as a threat to democracy. See Cardini 1990.
The exact nature and connections of these secret organizations were never fully revealed. The most spoken about was an alleged anti-communist underground army code-named Gladio and believed to be funded by the CIA. The case erupted in 1990 during the protracted investigations on the murder of three carabinieri in Peteano (Northern Italy) on May 31, 1972, which was first blamed on the communist Red Brigades (see Ganser 2005: 3–4). In March 2001, General Giandelio Maletti, during a trial of right-wing extremists for the killings of Piazza Fontana testified that “the CIA [. . .] wanted to create an Italian nationalism capable of halting what it saw as a slide to the left, and, for this purpose, it may have made use of right-wing terrorism” (Ganser 2005: 120).

The anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli, arrested in the Piazza Fontana bombing, fell to his death from the fourth floor of the police building while he was being interrogated. On the destruction of evidence, see Ganser 2005: 119.

Tacitus presents the guilt of the slave as a fact, although he is unsure of his motives (erotic rivalry or denied freedom).

Especially in Mafia contexts, individual magistrates gained immense popularity for the hardships these investigations imposed on them. Although Petronius is able to move around as he pleases, the atmosphere of distrust and threat from Nero and Tigellinus might remind the spectators of the difficult investigations in their own time.

The most prominent organization that seeks to prevent judicial injustice, Amnesty International (AI), founded in 1961, opened its Italian section in 1975. In its self-definition, it emphasizes its entirely humanitarian motivation and complete independence from politics (http://web.amnesty.org/pages/aboutai-index-eng).

The structure of Tacitus' account may have prompted the connection between the (historically unrelated) fire and the Pisonians. At the end of book 14, he briefly mentions the suspicions raised against C. Calpurnius Piso (14.65), but then goes on to recall Corbulo's campaign against the Parthians (15.1–18 and 15.24–31), and various events throughout the empire, including the great fire and the persecution of the Christians (15.38–15.44) before turning back to the conspiracy (15.48 ff.).

See Barron 2005: 67–8 and 201 (about the democratic values represented by the Christian community in the novel): “Confined to a narrow worldview [. . .] it is [. . .] impossible for Nero's courtiers to conceive of a society in which all people and classes are equal. The Rome of Nero is the absence of, not the positive counterpoise to, the equality of the novel's Christian community.”

Although Shakespeare and, in his wake, most of the plays and films about Caesar stage the attack in the senate house or the Capitol, it took place in a portico of the theater of Pompey.
42 See, for example *Catholic World*, p. 412: “The details of the carnage and the cruelty are too minute and too long drawn out. It is not in ordinary human nature to bear with much of this, even when presented by the most skilful hand”; *Poet Lore* 9, 1896: 147: “the reader must be prepared to plunge through a frightful phantasmagoria of brutality and licentiousness [...] sickening in revelations of the depths to which at times the human soul has sunk.”

43 This scene inspired Cecil B. DeMille to a similar shot in his 1932 *Sign of the Cross*. But while in *Quo Vadis* the spectators pull Aulus to safety, in *The Sign of the Cross* the man finally loses his grip on the garland and is killed by the lions.

44 Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.4: “And scorn was added to their destruction [...], in that they were crucified and set on fire to be burnt as a light at night when the daylight had waned.”

45 This arrangement was probably meant to evoke the mythological hunter Actaeon who was turned into a deer after accidentally seeing the goddess Diana while she bathed in the forest. He was then torn to pieces by his own dogs. Champlin 2003: 122–3 suggests that the Christians were presented as Actaeons to appease Diana, goddess of the moon (whose temple was scorched by the fire). That Christians were dressed as mythical characters during their executions in the arena is known from the first letter of Clemens to the Romans (who reports that women were presented as Dirces and Danaids). Tacitus’ report about the wild dogs is not taken up by any film version which instead use the more spectacular lions. In the novel, both dogs and lions are mentioned along with a multitude of other exotic wild animals (*QV* 55, 43–6).


47 *Isaiah* 53:7 (about a suffering servant of God): “Like a sheep being led to slaughter [...] he did not open his mouth.” The metaphor is used in the novel as well but from a different angle. In that context, it describes the helplessness of other nations who are slaughtered by Rome “like sheep” (*QV* 45, 345). The spectators of the arena games are said to be fed up with the Christians dying in the arena “like sheep” without providing spectacle, *QV* 65, 498.

48 “Tens of thousands of us were dispatched. But we shall not go! We shall not offer our heads to the butcher like sheep. [...] It is better to die in battle in the ghetto than to be carried away to Ponar [sc. the site of mass shootings] like sheep.” The Vilna Partisan Manifesto, in *Resistance during the Holocaust*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (no year), p. 15.

49 In Christian art, the risen Christ is sometimes depicted as a lamb carrying a banner of victory and the passage from Isaiah cited above is read (or alluded to) in the Good Friday services of most denominations.

50 See on this topic Winkler 2001: 61–2.

51 Various reasons have been offered for this reluctance: the need for West Germany as a Cold War ally, anxiety amongst Jews about being seen as soft
on communism, the fear of appearing vengeful. Studio boss Louis B. Mayer advocated a religious epic, while John Huston, the original director and playwright, had planned an open parallel between the persecution of the Christians under Nero and that of the Jews under Hitler. The idea was largely dropped when M. LeRoy, S. Zimbalist and S. Behrman took over. See Winkler 2001: 61.


53 See Zubrzycki 2003; for the broader background, see Huener 2004.


55 Quoted in Adamson 1990: 359 (with discussion of the speech’s implications).


57 The parallels between Nero and Nazi officials are acknowledged, with some reserve, in a review in the Corriere della Sera presented as an open letter to “Nero-Brandauer” written by the historical Nero: “You do not play me, you keep playing Mephisto. Why? We are no longer in the times of Göring and Goebbels, these Neros for the poor; I was at least entertaining.” Alberto Bevilacqua, “Controvideo: Lettera aperta al Nerone-Brandauer,” Corriere della Sera, March 10, 1985. The allusion to Brandauer’s earlier success in István Szabó’s film Mephisto (which won an Oscar as best foreign film in 1982) is, for all its criticism, not out of place. The film Mephisto (based on Klaus Mann’s 1936 novel of the same name) dealt with the danger and enticement of dictatorial power, focusing on the fictitious German actor Hendrik Hoefgen who is drawn in by the Nazi regime. The novel’s protagonist bears unmistakable resemblances to the real actor and director Gustaf Gründgens, yet both Brandauer and István Szabó made it clear that they had no intent to portray Gründgens but a fictitious character in which the corrupting effects of power and evil could be studied. Similarly, Brandauer in Quo Vadis is neither playing the real “Nero,” nor a Hitler, Mussolini or Stalin in disguise, but a character from a novel displaying certain instructive parallels to modern-time people.

58 Initially, the Walküre plans had been established in 1941 for the event of a large-scale uprising of POWs or slave laborers in Germany or for a massive allied landing. Stauffenberg and Henning von Tresckow then managed to have the plans altered (and approved) in a way that would make them suitable for a coup d’état. See Hoffmann 1994: 84.

59 According to Julius Leber, one of the conspirators, Stauffenberg’s brother Berthold, confessed to his mother a week before the assassination attempt: “It is terrible to know that it cannot succeed, and that nevertheless it has to be done for our country and our children” (quoted in Leber 1960: 126).
Tac. Ann. 15.47.2: “In the region of Piacenza a calf was born by the wayside which had a head on its leg. The interpretation of the haruspices was that a new head was being prepared for humankind, but it would not be effective and would not be hidden, because it had been aborted in the womb and was delivered by the road.” Instead of caput in crure found in manuscript M, manuscript L reads caput in cervice (“the calf had its head on its neck”) which makes more sense but does not provide much of an omen. See Koestermann 1963 ad loc.

This scene relies heavily on Suetonius’ account which is more detailed and gives the full dialogue with Balbillus (Suet. Nero 36.1). Suetonius, too, connects the prodigious comet to the Pisonian conspiracy.

The contrast between the scenes is underlined by the contrast of light and dark, night and day. Nero and Balbillus converse, seriously and full of anxiety, in an artificially darkened room (a tent-like structure, set up within the palace) that contains an abstract representation of the night sky, with Nero urging Balbillus for more information because he “needs light” in this mysterious affair. By contrast, Lygia is working on her mosaic outside, in plain sunlight, at the sounds of birds and surrounded by smiling co-workers and a caring familia, visibly at peace with herself and the world.

In the novel, Chilo learns that Paul is “imprisoned because of charges preferred by the Jews” (QV 16, 139). At the beginning of the 1951 version, however, Paul has been released and Aulus tells him that the Christian community has been under suspicion ever since he was arrested.

For a brief overview see Wischmeyer 2006: 94–5.

It is not clear whether Iseas, the slave of Pedanius Secundus who brings the file of the prefect’s investigation to the Christians, is a full member of their community or just a sympathizer like Nero’s former concubine Acte.

For a brief overview of the impact of immigration on Italian politics and society in the eighties, see Pugliese 1996: 933–83.

The first comprehensive study of contemporary immigration to Italy was published two years after the 1985 series was made (Sergi 1987). Several regional studies attested a growing awareness of the problem of immigration to the big cities, the prime destination for prospective maids. The first was conducted in 1979 by the workers’ unions ECAP CGIL-EMIM and focused on Latium. For Rome and Milan, similar studies appeared in the eighties, see the survey directed by F. Ferrarotti and published by the City of Rome in 1988.

On the living conditions of these workers see Neri 1981. For a general overview of the immigrants’ jobs, see Pugliese 1996: 953–6.

In the middle of the eighties, the Italian public first realized that the current legislation was inadequate to the new problem of immigration. The first law on the naturalization of 115,000 illegal immigrants was finally passed in 1986.
(the so-called legge 943, see Pugliese 1996: 939). At the same time, efforts were made to improve the legal status of immigrants in general, some of which could not meet the relatively strict requirements of law 943.

70 This is especially true after the Fiumicino massacre which occurred several months after the 1985 series was released. On December 27, 1985, gunmen opened fire almost simultaneously at El Al and TWA departure desks in the airports of Vienna and Rome, killing 17 people and wounding 116. The attacks were attributed to the foreign presence in Italy. In the aftermath of the attacks, vice secretary of internal affairs Raffaele Costa published the estimated number of foreigners in Italy (ca. 1,250,000). See Pugliese 1996: 939. In 1983, the Italian state department had estimated that there were 400,000 resident aliens (immigrants from third-world countries were not included but estimated to number roughly 500,000). See Große and Trautmann 1997: 112.

71 See Ganser 2005. On May 21, 1973, the New York Times reported that the explosion of a grenade in Milan on May 17, 1973 (for which anarchist Gianfranco Bertoli was immediately arrested) was suspected by Italians to be part of an international conspiracy. Arab guerillas, among others, were blamed by nationwide newspapers and an Arab was arrested in the wake of the events. Leftist newspapers blamed the CIA.

72 Since the allusions remain quite general, they can equally work in countries with similar experiences as Italy’s. This is especially true for the terrorist threat which was at the time a common phenomenon in all co-producing countries (Britain, France, Spain, West Germany) except Switzerland. On the European dimensions of underground armies, see Ganser 2005.

73 The English translation of 1993 by Kuniczak gives the name of the general as Corbulanus, probably a hypercorrection. The Polish original and the earlier translations by Curtin and Binion/Malevsky have the correct form Corbulo (Korbulo). Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo had a long and distinguished military career when he was appointed governor (legatus) of Cappadocia and Galatia by Nero and entrusted with his first command against the Parthians. In 60 ce he became governor of Syria and in 63 forced the Parthian nominee for the throne of Armenia, Tiridates, to submit to him. The three years of military service in the East Vinicius referred to is probably the time between 60 and 63, although it was, in effect, not a continuous campaign.

74 Criticism of military orders is especially warned against in a guide for American commissioned officers published in 1943:

Let us suppose that an order involving a new policy is issued from the war department. What happens? [...] Do we [...] immediately begin to tear the order to pieces? [...] The young officer cannot be too careful of his course in this respect. [...] The disastrous habit of ’knocking’ all orders and all authority is one of the most harmful influences in our whole service [...] . It is an old saying that it is a soldier’s privilege to growl. If this is so, our service would be often more benefited by the breach than by the observance of this privilege. (US Army 1943: 490–1)
In reality, triumphs and even *ovationes* were no longer granted to anyone outside the royal family at the time of Nero. The last general to be awarded an *ovatio* was Aulus Plautius Silvanius (the “Aulus Plautius” of the novel) in 47 CE. The novel also briefly mentions a triumph by “the elder” Vinicius but since this too lies a generation back and was granted for a victory in Germany it cannot be the model for Marcus Vinicius’ triumph in the film.


Solidarity of the officer with his soldiers is emphasized in *The Officer’s Guide*, 502 (note 74 above): “Making camp after a hard march he will not accept an invitation to lunch while his men go hungry awaiting a delayed wagon; he would not take shelter while his men lay out in a storm. In short he does everything at all times to make them feel that he is looking out for their interests.”

The portrayal of Aulus as an elderly man in the 1951 and 1985 films is, therefore, historically accurate, while the 1925 Amsterdam version labels him as “a young patrician, [who] with his wife and child has embraced the new faith.” (The L.A. copy is missing this reel.)

The production of *Quo Vadis* (which had been planned since 1938 but was then postponed for various reasons) began five years after the end of World War II, and it was Hollywood’s first grand epic after the war which secured special attention: see Winkler 1998: 172.

Fitzgerald 2001: 27 (“The American audience may well see its own image.”)

In *Gladiator* (2000), “England” and “Africa” are employed in much the same way in an opening title declaring that “at the height of its power, the Roman Empire was vast, stretching from the deserts of Africa to the borders of northern England.” On this opening, see Cyrino 2005: 226–7.

Kittstein 2005: 99–100 discusses only the fascist elements.


The two scenes of the Roman soldiers whipping the prisoners and of Jesus on his way to the crucifixion follow a careful choreography. Jesus is shown “moving diagonally upwards from left to right, an inserted movement that runs counter to the prevailing forward, downward diagonal thrust of the soldiers. In the visual irony this produces, Christ stumbles in the opposite direction to the relentless march of secular history” (Babington and Evans 1993: 184).

It is not certain what the exact meaning of the verse is. Shotter 1993: 123 points out that the return from the country “will have alluded to the long period [. . .] during which Galba had been absent from the heart of events in Rome.”

Most historians do not think that the fire was a Nazi plot but the belief, supported by a contemporary British investigation, has been widely held; Tobias 1964 and Ganser 2005: 189. Berthold Brecht (who believed in a
Nazi plot to blame communists) drew a parallel between the fire of the Reichstag and Nero's burning of Rome (in a ballad first published anonymously on December 17, 1933 in Vol. 5 of the leftist satirical magazine *Roter Pfeffer*).

On July 5, 1941 (after the attack on the Soviet Union), Hans Fritzsche (chief of the radio department in the ministry of propaganda) declared that “It was only the Führer’s decision to strike in time that saved our land from being overrun” (quoted in Davidson 1997: 538). On April 12, 1946, during the Nuremberg trials, Rudolf Höß (the former commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp) was asked by American psychologist Martin Gilbert “if he had ever considered whether the Jews whom he had murdered were guilty or had in any way deserved such a fate.” Höß denied that he had and explained that “even our military and ideological training took it for granted that we had to protect Germany from the Jews” (Gilbert 1948: 156).
Political implications, however, go beyond institutions and specific issues. *Quo Vadis?* has been eminently filmable especially because of its opportunities for spectacle and the films’ scenes of the Roman crowd invite consideration of how such scenes treat the people. Sienkiewicz was impressed by American democracy but his novel does not encourage democratic hope. The people of Rome, as he depicts them, are fickle, selfish, and stupid. To be sure, those who have become Christians are generous, loyal, and self-controlled and the Christian community is without class or ethnic distinctions. Yet it relies on charismatic leadership. The faithful beg Peter to flee from Rome because they think the church desperately needs him (*QV* 68, 512–13) but when Peter acquiesces in the will of the people, he is wrong. Evidently, the community can survive without him but, equally clearly, he is wiser than the people. The novel shows a church without any formal hierarchy but nothing in it, even indirectly, suggests that the Catholic church should be less hierarchical today. So the Christians do not offer a working democratic model either. How, then, do the adaptations show the people of Rome?

In the novel, the most striking feature of Rome is its diversity, visible both in its population and in its urban development. The inhabitants of Rome have different ethnic and social backgrounds: they speak a plethora of languages and adhere to a variety of cults, both traditional and recent. Repeatedly, this diversity is set against earlier times in which the city housed a homogenous population, holding the same principles and sharing a common history.

The novel presents this diversity as a result of Roman might and success but it is not a reassuring phenomenon. Romans brought slaves from all four corners of the world to Rome, some of whom have long since been freed and climbed the social ladder but without acquiring traditional
Roman values or attachment to its holy sites. Others were attracted by the wealth and prosperity to be found in the city but none of them has gained membership in the political elite which is still made up of traditional Roman families. Excluded from political power and without roots in their new home, these new immigrants pose a threat to the state kept in check only by force, especially by the praetorian guard. Much of this description is indebted to the poems of Juvenal, especially to the description of Rome in the third satire.\(^1\)

The most concise description of this latent threat is found in Sienkiewicz’s account of the breakdown of public order following the great fire. He underlines its enormity by comparing the calamity to the sack of Rome by the Gauls in 390 BCE. Although the sources do not describe any such breakdown of civic order, the comparison comes straight out of Sienkiewicz’s sources: Tacitus reports that some people pointed out that the blaze started on the same day the Senones (a Gallic tribe) had captured Rome and set it on fire in 387 BCE (Tac. Ann. 15.41.2).\(^2\) But, Sienkiewicz says, when the Gauls conquered the city, the Romans were a “disciplined integral people, attached to the city and its altars . . . but now crowds of a many-tongued populace roamed nomad-like around the walls of burning Rome – composed for the greater part of slaves and freedmen, excited, disorderly, and ready, under the pressure of want, to turn against authority and the city” (QV 46, 353). Several factors thus contribute to the public disorder that makes the catastrophe complete. The most important one is the lack of “attachment” to the city, produced either by the social or the geographical origin of the people. The populace has become too diverse to find a common denominator in times of disaster, and their unfree status or their unfree origins make them less likely to identify with the city and its society. Everyone is therefore on his own in the struggle for life.

For a Polish reader of Sienkiewicz’s time, this passage had a distinctly political subtext. Poland was partitioned between Russia, Prussia, and Austria. With Polish language and culture widely restricted by the occupying countries, Poles, who had always lived in a linguistically diverse country, were being forced to become themselves a “many-tongued” nation.\(^3\) Their anger exploded in several uprisings. By the time the novel was written, however, the positivist movement, to which Sienkiewicz felt close although he had turned away from it in writing historical novels, promoted a different strategy of resistance. Polish intellectuals would educate the nation,
The Roman People

strengthen its economy, and keep alive or newly instill in the common people love and appreciation for their own history, literature and religion. The movement sought to spare Polish lives while bringing about a strong identification with the nation. So Sienkiewicz’s insistence on the “many-tongued populace” could be read as a warning against ethnic diversity which, especially under the pressure of the occupying forces, could endanger the project of keeping national identity alive. In this reading, not only divisions among ethnic Poles themselves but also other groups like Jews or Tartars living in Polish territory, form a possible threat. The novel is permeated with this Polish anxiety.

In the novel, the loss of Roman values and national unity is facilitated by the behavior of the emperor and the court. Nero’s interest is almost exclusively centered on his own pleasure, especially on his desire to pursue an artistic career. On the way to his summer resort in Antium, he displays a collection of instruments matching, in their diversity, the diversity of the Roman populace who watches in amazement. He plans a trip to Greece to perform in the theaters there, and rumors spread that he is considering withdrawing to either Greece or Egypt to rule the world from there (QV 18, 149–50).

Nero’s lack of Romanness finally goes so far as to put art above the whole city of Rome. During their stay at Antium, Petronius criticizes the emperor’s new epic about the sack of Troy, causing Nero to complain vividly that he had never seen a burning city and could, therefore, not rival Homer. Soon after, news about a gigantic fire in Rome reaches the court. Instead of rushing back to the city and leading the relief efforts in person, Nero stays in Antium until the flames threaten the Palatine and then returns, anxious not to miss the spectacle. Arriving at the outskirts of Rome, he climbs the Appian aqueduct and performs his newly composed Troy epic against the backdrop of the flames.

The novel does not make it entirely certain that Nero ordered the burning of Rome but it certainly implies that he did when Petronius urges that he take responsibility for the blaze (QV 48, 373–4). The most important point, however, is not whether he ordered the fire but the fact that everyone thinks him capable of such an atrocity. While the rulers and the people of the past had defended Rome vigorously against a catastrophic enemy onslaught, Nero derives pleasure from the destruction of his own capital.

The reaction of the people, on the other hand, lacks traditional patriotism as well. In the face of the catastrophe, there is no common effort to
save the city. Everyone fights for his own needs and there is little consideration either for fellow citizens or for Rome itself. When the splendid, awe-inspiring buildings of the city center fall in ruins, nobody seems to care. While looting and breakdown of public order are not uncommon in historical catastrophes of this kind, it clearly does not conform to Roman ideals, fueled by self-sacrificing heroes such as the Horatii, Horatius Cocles, or Mucius Scaevola. Such heroes, however, are not found in Nero’s Rome, neither among the aristocrats nor among the common people. At least for Marcus, such selfish behavior does not come as a surprise. The first thing he fears while heading back to the burning city was a revolt of slaves taking advantage of the chaos: “Hundreds of thousands of those people were thinking of the times of Spartacus, and merely waiting for a favorable moment to seize arms against their oppressors and Rome. Now the moment had come! Perhaps war and slaughter were raging in the city together with fire” (QV 42, 322). Likewise, Vinicius does not think it improbable “that the praetorians had hurled themselves on the city, and were slaughtering at command of Caesar” (QV 42, 322). Although neither an organized slave revolt nor a slaughter of civilians occurs while the fire is raging, the fact that Marcus thinks such events possible is revealing. In Nero’s Rome, traditional values do not even exist in the imagination of the people.

Since the people of Rome care about their private loss but not about Rome as a city, it turns out to be relatively easy to appease them after the fire. The change is the more striking as Sienkiewicz has depicted the rage of the homeless people in vivid colors. First, women turn on Tigellinus, begging for bread and shelter. When the praetorians try to establish public order, the excitement only rises further, and people start to curse the emperor and his court. Shortly before, rumors began to spread “that Nero intended to annihilate the city, destroy the inhabitants to the last person” (QV 46, 354). For this reason, imperial relief efforts, such as opening the gardens on the Palatine to the homeless, and distributing grain and wine, do not immediately win over the populace. But when Nero, under the influence of Poppaea and Tigellinus, presents the Christians as culprits and promises spectacular games to punish them, public opinion quickly turns: looking forward to the extraordinary event and enjoying the imperial gifts bestowed on them, the populace no longer blames the emperor. And although the general emergency has subsided by the time of the games and people have had time to meditate more calmly on the loss of the old city, there is still no regret.
for the destruction of so many sites significant in Roman history. Such fickleness is typical of the Roman people in the novel (see above, p. 140).

With pleasure as their ultimate goal in life, the mob as well as the aristocrats are deeply bewildered to find the Christians steadfast and heroic during their ordeal in the arena. Most of them seem not to care about the pain inflicted on them and even those few who hurl accusations at Nero and the crowd seem to hold completely different values. In fact, the Christian community is the only group in Rome preserving, albeit for different reasons, some of the ideals of early Roman times. In their community, plebeians and patricians live harmoniously together and care more about the common good than about themselves. While everyone else is fleeing in a wild frenzy during the fire, Christian workers stay in the emergency zone rescuing victims, among them Marcus Vinicius who collapses with exhaustion during his search for Lygia.

The public execution of the only group adhering to what was once a virtue among Roman citizens is therefore a powerful sign of the depravity of Roman society. Even those who do not share the Christian faith could appreciate the service Christians render during the fire. Instead, the mob is set once again on its own amusement, demanding more and more exciting executions as they become accustomed to the spectacle.

Furthermore, the novel’s social world is sharply divided. The only sympathetic characters who are not Christians are aristocrats, Petronius and Aulus Plautius, and the slave Eunice, the lover of an aristocrat. The romantic hero and heroine are a noble and a princess. Even though the novel criticizes Petronius’ snobbery, it consistently implies that common people, especially if they are not Christian or come from foreign countries, are incapable of political judgment or more than sporadic humanity. Among the Christians, on the other hand, people of humble origins consistently display heroic virtue.

In the early 1912 and 1925 versions, the diversity of the populace and its lack of attachment to Rome do not play a significant role. Since the camera follows mostly Petronius and Vinicius, there is little room for the life of common people. Orientalism, in the novel a feature of both the people and the court, is mainly limited to Nero’s environment where elaborate vestments, black slaves, and exotic furniture illustrate the emperor’s eccentricity (see, for example, Plate 5.1). Although an intertitle in the 1925 film announces that “the corruption which reigned in the palace of Nero was reflected in the lives of the common folk,” we only get a short glimpse
of a (relatively harmless) orgy of common people. The topic is then quickly abandoned, while Nero’s eccentricity is brought to attention every time he appears.

Also, there are no hints at a general “fickleness” of the mob and its lack of interest in the common good until after the burning of Rome. In the 1912 version, for example, the exhausted Marcus is rescued by workers during the fire but the men are not identified as Christians. While Sienkiewicz uses the detail to illustrate the difference between Christian and pagan behavior, this film stresses the solidarity of “simple” people, in contrast to the brutal behavior of the praetorian guard which is seen clubbing and mistreating people. In both the 1912 and the 1925 film, the difference between the court and the people is most obvious when the enraged mob approaches Nero during the great fire.

The 1912 film shows Nero returning to Rome from Antium and singing from the balcony of his palace as the city burns. Angered, the people – who for all the disorder seem to be a rather homogenous crowd – approach the
palace with shouts of “murderer,” “tyrant,” and “firesetter.” While these or similar expressions can also be found in the novel, the film then has the people insult Nero with cries of “Firesetter, you have murdered your own flesh and blood.” This accusation comes as a surprise because the previous scenes showed only the plight of the common people, not the murderous rivalries within Nero’s family. However, both ancient sources and the novel mention Nero’s assassination of his mother Agrippina (QV 7, 70 and elsewhere, cp. Tac. Ann. 14.8 and Suet. Nero 39.2). The 1912 film counts on a spectator who is familiar with the book; the director could feel that the short allusion was enough to make the audience remember the accusations – and it is not critical for the story anyway.

In the 1925 film, Nero watches the fire not from an aqueduct but from the Palatine, playing his lute. When the people approach him, their intention is, initially, to persuade him to punish the incendiaries (whom they do not link to the emperor).\(^7\) Once they reach the palace, though, praetorians try to hold them back with spears and clubs and the mood of the people turns against Nero. The next intertitle has the mob shout “Death to Nero! Death to the incendiary!” The shift seems arbitrary since no evidence for Nero’s involvement has been put forward. The film abbreviates the narrative of the novel, where suspicion against Nero spreads gradually among the populace. When Vinicius reaches the burning city, “the throng assumed in places a threatening aspect. Vinicius heard voices accusing Nero of burning the city” (QV 43, 330). But although these outbreaks are violent and include death threats to the emperor and to Poppaea, the hostile attitude does not yet seem to be universal.

In the 1925 film, when the mood of the people becomes ever more threatening, Chilo suddenly appears behind Nero’s throne, whispering in the emperor’s ear and apparently suggesting a solution. The content of his speech is not shown but the next intertitle has Nero address the people: “Romans! The punishment of the incendiaries is in our own hands. It was the Christians.” The crowd immediately responds with shouts of “Death to the Christians!” and “Long live Caesar!” without asking for proof. The rumors about Nero’s own involvement seem completely forgotten. In both silent films, it is not clear what persuades the people to accept Nero’s claim that he is innocent and to turn on the Christians instead. Since the films have not addressed the ever-changing favors of the mob, viewers must either supplement this notion from the novel or otherwise conclude that the extraordinary situation prompts an extraordinary reaction.
The next mass scenes in both films are the arena games dedicated to the execution of the Christians. During this spectacle, we see the crowd’s enjoyment but both the 1912 and the 1925 film also include ordinary Romans who show sympathy for the victims. These feelings are mostly triggered by the courageous behavior of the condemned. In the 1925 arena scene, when Aulus Plautius escapes the lions by climbing the barriers and clinging to a garland, he is helped by the spectators who pull him to safety. When Pomponia manages to free herself from the chariot she is tied to and drive it to victory, she is met by a jubilant crowd of spectators who just minutes ago had been eager to see her die. The spectators thus reward the entertainment provided them by the ingenious behavior of the victim.

Even though we see moments of sympathy for the victims in the 1912 version, for the most part Nero’s strategy of diverting the rage of the mob towards the Christians continues successfully as the executions take place. When Chilo, horrified at the sight of the human torches in Nero’s gardens, addresses the people of Rome denouncing Nero and Tigellinus, the spectators charge him. After a short flight on which he has just enough time to be baptized by Paul, Chilo is arrested by Tigellinus and tortured.

The next intertitle in the 1912 film announces a rebellion of Roman legions who later proclaim Galba emperor and prompt Nero’s flight and suicide. There is no indication that the people of Rome are at any stage involved in the revolution and we do not know how they react to the emperor’s downfall. The last two intertitles (“So Nero died, consumed as if by fire. There was mourning and the sadness of death” and “But out of the tears and the blood came a new life: Christianity, symbol of love & peace”) focus on the Christians only and do not indicate whether the “mourning” and the “sadness of death” refer to the general public also.

In the 1925 film, on the other hand, the people take a decisive stand at the end of the gruesome arena games. After the crowd has cheered Pomponia’s success in the chariot race, the intertitles proclaim:

“The city welcomed the news of Galba’s revolt – for it was not war against Rome, but war upon the tyrant Nero.”

“The metropolitan legions under the guidance of Vinicius begin a revolt against Nero and proclaim Galba emperor.”

Shortly afterwards, when Ursus spectacularly defeats the wild bull threatening Lygia, the spectators unanimously demand their release. This reaction
is consistent with the earlier cases in which a victim’s unusual courage, strength, or ingenuity won popular approval.

Nero, however, is hesitant and is not even moved to mercy by the appearance of Marcus Vinicius, who jumps into the arena and asks for Lygia’s life, reminding the spectators that he “won twenty battles for Rome and was bearing the scars of a dozen wounds.” While his speech intensifies the people’s call for mercy, Nero finally turns his thumb down, condemning Lygia to death. While these dramatic events take place, a group of Galba’s soldiers enters the arena on horseback. Enraged by Nero’s cruelty, the people break into shouts of “Kill him – Make Galba emperor – Kill Nero!” The crowd then storms at Nero, but the emperor manages to escape with the help of Tigellinus and a few loyal members of the praetorian guard who lead him to a trap door in the palace. Tigellinus, defending Nero, is then killed by Vinicius and the emperor commits suicide outside the city, while Galba’s troops are in hot pursuit.

The general impression of the mass scenes is, therefore, mixed. In the 1925 film, people turn against Nero but it is unlikely that their protest would have taken on violent form had not Galba’s troops entered the arena at that precise point. At the same time, it becomes clear that the people feel empathy only for those who have proven their (physical) strength, their courage, and their (military) skills. Victims in the arena are favored and helped by the masses if they are courageous and physically adroit (like Pomponia, Ursus, and Aulus) or if they have fought victoriously for the country (like Vinicius). On the other hand, victims who let themselves be slaughtered without resistance cannot count on the crowd’s sympathy. When Chilo, horriﬁed by the executions, runs into the arena unarmed and accuses Nero of arson, shouting out to the crowd: “Hear me, O Romans, fellow citizens!” there is virtually no response. On the contrary: when the emperor kills Chilo with the shot of an arrow and the corpse is eaten by lions, people seem to applaud and enjoy the spectacle. The address “citizens” neither stirs them up nor does it kindle any republican feelings. What the populace in the 1925 film wants is apparently a strong but just leader – Galba. Admiration for strength and physical prowess can of course be found in ancient sources (and in Sienkiewicz’s novel). It also resonates with the fascist cult of the body and the idea of the survival of the fittest. The weak and vulnerable, on the other hand, deserve no mercy and support. The inherent danger of pitting brutal “Romans” against good “Christians” and thus angering the fascist authorities in Italy (who could easily interpret the persecution as an allusion to their own
ambiguous attitude towards the church) is cleverly avoided in the 1925 film by having Christian characters perform these admirable deeds. Even those who are not as strong as Ursus are shown winning the favor of the spectators.

Compared to the silent films, the 1951 version takes a greater interest in the people as such. There are more instances depicting them and these scenes are more evenly spread out over the entire length of the film. In the very first scene ordinary Romans, including children, watch the victorious legions approaching Rome and, shortly after, there is the giant homecoming parade of Marcus Vinicius held in a public square packed with people. The scene does not have a direct equivalent in the novel (where Marcus comes home as a private person) but is obviously inspired by the procession accompanying Nero to Antium. Both events include an overwhelming display of Roman wealth and power, and both are watched by a mesmerized crowd. In both cases, Peter and Lygia are present, although in the film they do not seem to stand together. The reactions of the spectators, too, are comparable in both scenes. In the novel, Nero is “met by a storm of shouts and applause: ‘Hail, divine Caesar! Imperator, hail, conqueror! Hail, incomparable! – son of Apollo, Apollo himself!’” But there are also voices of dissent. Some ridicule Nero, as Sienkiewicz explains, “for the Roman rabble was satirical and keen in reckoning, and let itself criticize even great triumphators” (QV 36, 289). Other charges are more serious: People “hidden behind piles of stone and the corners of temples, shouted: ‘Matricide! Nero! Orestes! Alcmaeon!’”

In the film, people break into frenetic applause and approving shouts when Nero appears on the balcony of his palace to watch the parade and show himself to his people. A young man, shown in close-up, raises his arm in greeting, shouting “Hail, Nero, son of Jupiter.” A mother lifts her baby over her head, shrieking “Look at him, my darling, the emperor!” Only one woman does not join the frenzy, hissing “Wifekiller, motherkiller” at the emperor (Nero had his first wife, Octavia, banished and later executed, see, e.g., Suet. Nero 35). When a man asks her to be silent because she will get everyone into trouble, she squarely replies: “Everybody knows it, he is a beast.” The rest of the crowd is mostly drunk with enthusiasm for Nero and the splendor of Rome. Yet from the scene immediately before the triumph, we know that the emperor, to whom they look up in unconditional devotion, has no love or even respect for them. “I wish it had but a single throat, that mob, that I might cut it,” Nero tells Petronius during a conversation in the palace.
Lygia mirrors the distance of Christians from the general excitement. Although she first told Marcus that she was not interested in seeing his triumph, she decides to go and attend the spectacle. But while the other spectators go wild with excitement, she turns around and walks away before the parade is over. Her face expresses confusion and disapproval. The general hysteria has not infected her.

It has often been noticed that this particular scene bears resemblances to the public spectacles organized by the Nazi and the fascist regimes. The camera perspective looking over the masses, the emphasis on the Roman salute used by Nero and by Marcus, and the general frenzy strongly point in this direction. Also, the warning by the man not to utter any inconsiderate criticism indicates that Nero’s reign has, by this time, already been transformed into a regime of terror for those who disagree with official policies. It implies the presence of informers.

The Roman populace is thus portrayed early on as susceptible to mass spectacle, with the few critical minds being subdued by fear. A similar tendency is discernible in the novel, where the most fervent critics hide behind the corner of buildings instead of mingling openly with the crowd. When Nero hears their accusations, he raises “the polished emerald to his eyes as if to see and remember those who uttered them” (QV 36, 289).

In contrast to the novel, however, the spectators in the 1951 film are an ethnically and socially uniform crowd. There are no blacks or exotic-looking people among them and, with the exception of senators who briefly appear wearing their togas with their characteristic purple stripes, there are no visible social distinctions in dress or behavior. Similarly, no foreign languages are heard. Christians blend in with the crowd as well. Lygia is not conspicuous among the Romans in dress or appearance and this impression is confirmed by later scenes showing the Christian community in regular Roman garb, without any distinctive ethnic features. The crowd resembles the intended spectator (i.e., a predominantly white audience) so that it can fit either the fascist subtext (indicated by the fear of free speech) or the “American” subtext of the welcome parade for deserving soldiers (cp. p. 121). The only person who is noticeable within the crowd is the apostle Peter with his white beard and hair who is portrayed as an extraordinary character, both in comparison to the other Christians and to the pagans surrounding him.

Their outer similarity to ordinary Romans marks the Christian way of life as a personal decision that can, potentially, be shared by everyone. If the Christians, who appear to be social peers of their pagan neighbors, can
withstand the attraction of the mass spectacle, so could, in theory, the Roman crowd. Right from the beginning, there is thus a potential for resistance against Nero that will, however, be realized only at the very end of the film.

In the meantime, the people, swept away by the display of wealth and splendor, do not realize how dangerous Nero’s reign will be for them. The spectator, on the other hand, learns early on that the emperor loathes not only Rome as a city for its foul odor and its stifling air but also the very people inhabiting it. Petronius remarks that the people are necessary, both as an audience for his artistic career and as subjects for him as a ruler, do not have a lasting effect. Nero feels “irked,” “irritated,” and “tortured” by the crowd, although his actual life takes place far away from the common people of Rome.

The fire further influences the portrayal of the Roman people in the 1951 film. The safest and, in fact, the only place they can flee to is, in this scenario, the Palatine which is unharmed by the flames. But when Marcus, amidst a desperate crowd of refugees, arrives at the entrance, he discovers that the area is sealed off by armed praetorian guards. While in the 1912 and 1925 versions, the crowds approach the Palatine to seek out Nero (either to ask him to avenge them or to take revenge themselves for his alleged arson), in this film, the crowd is initially not interested in the emperor but only in the safety the Palatine offers. The military cordon is, therefore, an act of unmotivated cruelty, showing the emperor’s contempt for human life. This detail is significant as it deviates considerably from the novel and its historical sources. In describing Nero’s reaction to the catastrophe, Sienkiewicz roughly follows Tacitus, who reports that Nero opened the imperial gardens to the homeless, distributed goods among them, and subsidized the price for grain (QV 46, 359; cp. Tac. Ann. 15.39). Although these measures did not suffice to quell the rumors that the emperor had been involved in the blaze, there was certainly no attempt to attack Nero or to storm the palace.

In the 1951 film, the decision finally to open the Palatine to the refugees is neither the decision of Nero, as in the novel, nor is it enforced by the crowd as in the 1912 and 1925 versions. Instead, Marcus Vinicius argues with the commander of the praetorians and finally overcomes him in a fencing match. Seeing their commander defeated, the praetorians let the masses pass. The people then run up to the palace, only to find themselves
confronted by two fresh cordons of praetorians who try to secure the entrance to the palace. It is only now that the first shouts of “incendiary” are heard and the people take on an increasingly hostile attitude, as they realize that Nero actually endangers their life and well-being.

It is significant, however, that the people need a heroic figure like Marcus Vinicius to overcome the initial resistance of the praetorians on the bridge. Only after Marcus leads the way do the people become confident enough to attack the palace. Shortly before, the film shows the helplessness of ordinary people, as throngs of refugees flee aimlessly through the burning streets. First, Marcus picks up a little girl who has lost her parents and hands her to a woman, possibly her mother, whom he meets accidentally in the crowd. Shortly after, Marcus shows the panicking crowd a safe way out of the inferno. Pushing aside the people around him, he manages to open a lid covering the manhole leading to the elaborate Roman system of sewers. Marcus leads the refugees in, assisting them as they climb down, and advises them to move on to the river where they are relatively safe from the blaze. He himself is last to enter the sewers, just as a building is about to collapse on him.

These changes are particularly striking when compared with the novel and the earlier films, in which Marcus Vinicius collapses, overcome by smoke and exhaustion, and is rescued by common workers. The heroic stature of Marcus in the 1951 film does not allow for such weakness. Marcus here conforms to a specifically American ideal of a self-determined and strong, yet caring individual who is not afraid to confront authorities if necessary. It is only in this version that Marcus wears his uniform while searching for Lygia. The image of the brave commander whose military expertise helps him also in civilian life probably caters to the idea often promoted in America that military service is not only a necessity but possesses value in and of itself. It is especially striking in comparison with the 1925 version which introduces him announcing that “Vinicius, the youngest general in Nero’s armies, returns from triumphs over the Parthians” but never has him use any military skills. The people of the 1951 film are not the wild mob of the novel; they require good leadership, but have the sense to follow Marcus when he shows them how to escape the fire.

The only detail that mars Vinicius’ selflessness during the fire is his mad love for Lygia. When he arrives at her burning house, he violently grasp an elderly and apparently destitute neighbor by his tunic, demanding to
know where Lygia is. The old man, believing that Vinicius is going to kill him, begs for his life and tells him, trembling, that the girl has fled. Marcus frantically continues his search, leaving the helpless man behind. Similarly, when he finally spots Lygia, Ursus, and the boy Nazarius in the crowd, he works his way up to them, recklessly pushing women and children aside. But since these instances of recklessness are motivated by love, the spectator, who has just seen Vinicius as a successful leader, is not supposed to disapprove. When he reaches Lygia, moreover, her first words after a jubilant embrace concern Nazarius, who has just lost his mother in the collapse of a burning house. Marcus immediately promises him, “we’ll get you out of here, son.” It is this mixture of erotic love, paternal care, and strong leadership that forms the unique character of Hollywood’s Marcus Vinicius. In the novel, he is far more selfishly intent only on saving his beloved and the narrator does not criticize him for this.

The fickleness of the ordinary people becomes apparent in their confrontation with Nero and the court. The refugees turn violent only after they discover that the praetorians actively block their way to safety. The angered crowd breaks through the first barricade and threatens to storm the palace. The scene then changes to Nero’s council inside the palace, so that the spectator can only indirectly follow the events outside. As the situation seems to become more desperate, Nero considers various measures to appease the people’s rage. Promises of grain, oil, and wine, as suggested by the emperor, are quickly dismissed because Petronius warns him that the people will take those things “without your permission,” and he tells the emperor that what the population really wants is justice. Nero reacts impatiently: “No mob ever wants justice, they want vengeance.” It is then that the plan to offer the mob a victim forms in Nero’s mind. When he considers offering Tigellinus to the people as a scapegoat (the prefect of the praetorians has in this version burnt Rome at Nero’s command), Poppaea steps in, suggesting “not one victim but a hundred, a thousand,” taken from “a group who worships one they say is higher than you,” and who “prophesy that the end of the world shall be caused by fire.” It does not take much to convince Nero. Despite Petronius’ protests, he signs an edict declaring the Christians the culprits and vowing to “exterminate these criminals in a manner matching the enormity of their crimes.”

The scene then switches to Marcus and Lygia as they meet in what seems to be the suburban villa of Aulus Plautius on the morning after the fire. Marcus is determined to meet with “Nerva and the others” to plan the downfall of Nero, whom he believes responsible for the blaze. The
people's reaction to Nero's edict, on the other hand, is reported only later and only at secondhand. When Marcus asks Petronius to sign a letter inviting Galba to march on Rome and take power, Petronius, in the course of the conversation, asks Marcus if he had not heard the emperor's edict being read at the street corners and presented to the populace along with grain and wine. The people seem to believe the accusations against the Christians because, as Petronius puts it, "they will believe any lie if it is fantastic enough."

This unfavorable portrayal of both Nero and the populace of Rome is at odds with ancient sources. In the film, the emperor does not engage in relief efforts for the homeless and dispenses grain and wine only to make his edict against the Christians more appealing to the masses. The people, for their part, accept this version without question. In Tacitus' account, on the other hand, Nero (of whose responsibility for the fire Tacitus is uncertain) opens his own gardens to the destitute population, as well as the campus Martius and the "monuments of Agrippa."¹⁸

Furthermore, according to Tacitus, food and other necessary items were shipped to Rome from Ostia, Tac. Ann. 15.39. Tacitus then goes on to describe the rebuilding of Rome. Considerable attention is paid to the emperor's Golden House (of whose luxury Tacitus disapproves) but he does not fail to mention many beneficial measures that were both designed to prevent further catastrophic fires in the city and, Tacitus notes, added to the beauty of the rebuilt city (Ann. 15.43.5).

Only when all the effort and generosity of the emperor did not quell the rumor that Nero himself had started the fire did the persecution and execution of the Christians begin (Tac. Ann. 15.44.2). But the games did not have the desired effect, either: instead of diverting attention from Nero, they aroused pity for the Christians who had formerly been hated by the people for their alleged crimes and their superstition.

While the sources report mixed reactions of the people despite vigorous efforts by the emperor to bring them relief, the populace in the 1951 film is all too easily convinced to turn their hatred away from Nero. The people enjoy the arena games and there is also private looting of Christian homes immediately after the owners have been arrested. These acts of theft seem to be motivated not by need but by sheer hatred: when Marcus, alarmed by Petronius' warnings, arrives at the house of Aulus Plautius, he finds a group of well-dressed, apparently unharmed people carrying away pieces of furniture, silver vessels, and other belongings of Plautius' family. The "whole scurvy lot," he learns from one of the looters, has been
imprisoned and a woman is upset because she had unknowingly raised her children “right by the house of dirty Christians.” Yet this looting is quite different from the general collapse of social order in the novel since it is directed against those the people believe are public enemies. The people are credulous. However, “dirty Christian” is a surprising expression. For the modern audience the epithet is far more familiar as an insult to Jews and this scene is one of the few moments in the film where the Holocaust seems to be a subtext. The plundering of Aulus’ house evokes the theft of Jewish property (although this was typically accomplished through legal mechanisms).

There is no mention of the initial rumors about Nero, and hostility towards the Christians only increases during the arena games instead of giving way to pity, as in Tacitus’ account and to some extent in the earlier films. People joke and jeer as the victims are being driven into the arena and Flavius, Marcus’ faithful officer, who is involved in the plan to overthrow Nero, is worried because “they are calling for blood. I doubt that we can chance anything today. Nothing can change the temper of this mob.” When Peter appears in the stands, blessing the martyrs and announcing that “here where Nero rules today, Christ shall rule forever,” the spectators burst into scornful laughter. Peter is then arrested amidst the jeers of the crowd and sentenced to death. This scene is very different from its counterpart in the novel (where Peter blesses the victims silently, while “no one saw him, for all heads were turned to the arena,” QV 55, 435) and helps to shape the image of the Roman masses as a pitiless, misguided mob.

Their attitude does not change during the first day of the games, when the victims are thrown to the lions. As in the 1925 film, a man tries to escape from the wild beasts by climbing a garland but, while the spectators in the earlier version applauded the victim and pulled him to safety, the onlookers in the Hollywood version do not make the slightest attempt to come to his rescue. On the contrary, their laughing and sneering faces are seen from deep below, from what is probably the victims’ perspective. They watch and joke as the unfortunate is finally snatched and mauled by a lion. In this atmosphere, the occasional glimpse of a young woman or man covering their faces in horror does not change the overall appearance of the mob.

The mood in the stands begins to change only when general Aulus Plautius is crucified in the arena and denounces Nero as the arsonist (this
is an innovation – in the novel he is not a Christian). The mob is displeased at the execution of the general but it does not protest loudly nor demand Plautius’ release. Historically, however, only slaves and non-citizens could be crucified, while Roman citizens were exempt from this degrading form of execution. But since most viewers will not know this, the mode of execution creates a parallel between the victims in the arena and Christ (a parallel already reinforced by the crucifixion of Peter shortly before the arena scene) and therefore it helps to pit “good” versus “evil” as represented by Nero. Consequently, the most shocking detail of the scene for the modern spectator is probably not the crucifixion as such but the fact that a guard strikes the general with a whip across the face to silence him.

Up to this point the film has done little to encourage the spectator to identify with the crowd. Clearly, the excitement in the stands bears resemblances to the excitement in modern sport arenas but there are few other indications that invite the modern spectator to put himself in the shoes of the Roman audience. The camera is for the most part located on the height of the arena (i.e., representing the perspective of the victims), and in contrast to Cecil B. de Mille’s *Sign of the Cross* (where people are seen consuming snacks and studying programs), for example, the spectators do not eat, drink, or read programs as their modern counterparts would.

Shortly after the death of Plautius, Ursus and Lygia are led into the arena and the people greet the spectacle with excited shouts, showing no disapproval for Nero or the games themselves. Only Marcus’ loyal officer shows his dissent, observing with disgust that Marcus has been brought to the imperial balcony to watch Lygia die. During the bullfight, people root for Ursus with shouts and cheers. Unlike in the lion scene, there seems to be no more scorn for the victims and, when Ursus prevails, the excitement reaches its peak. The crowd showers him with flowers, throws pieces of garments into the arena, and enthusiastically demands mercy. Among the crowd, a young man calls Nero the “burner of Rome,” but his cries do not seem to catch on with the crowd whose attention is now focused on Marcus Vinicius rather than on Nero. Marcus, who has been tied to a pole next to Poppaea’s seat, has just managed to free himself and, taking advantage of the general confusion, jumps into the arena and joins Lygia and Ursus. Members of the praetorian guard quickly surround the group with drawn swords, awaiting Nero’s decision over life and death. While the courtiers one after the other join the people’s demand for the victims’ release, Nero hesitates, leaving Marcus’ officer Flavius enough time to prepare their
armed revolution. The same moment Nero turns his thumb down, Flavius’ soldiers run into the arena, fighting and killing the praetorian guards before they can harm Marcus, Lygia, and Ursus. All the time, the crowd has remained relatively passive, showing their participation in words, but not in deeds. Yet, it is the people, not Nero, whom Marcus addresses as soon as the praetorians are defeated: “Citizens of Rome! I am Marcus Vinicius, commander of your fourteenth legion. This man who burnt Rome, who killed innocents for his own crime, the rule of this madman is ended. Rome is yours again. Tonight, general Galba marches from the North. Your army has risen. Hail Galba! Galba, new emperor of Rome!” The claim that the army had risen to win back the political power of the people unlawfully seized by Nero is inconsistent both historically and in terms of the film itself. Historically, Nero ascended the throne legally as a member of the Julio–Claudian dynasty. For more than six decades, since the end of the republic, power in Rome had belonged to this family. The Roman republic too had been, by modern standards, an oligarchy rather than a democratic state. The ordinary people crowding the arena had never been in charge of Roman politics and, despite their numbers and their overwhelming presence they are, once again, not the moving factor behind the political development. Despite Marcus’ fervent speech, declaring that “the people’s army” has risen, his own motives for plotting against Nero have been personal, to save Lygia and the Christians from the impending persecution. Flavius and the other officer organizing the uprising in the arena seem to be motivated by their loyalty towards their commander, Marcus Vinicius.

On the other hand, Vinicius’ speech caters to a modern, democratic audience in suggesting that the army’s obligation is not to the emperor, but to “the people,” and that likewise the power in Rome belongs to the people rather than to an individual. (It is noteworthy that the 1925 version, to which the arena scene of the 1951 film is indebted, does not include an address to the people.) Marcus then aptly concludes his speech by a salute to Galba as the new emperor, giving the people the opportunity to acclaim the new ruler, legitimizing his ascent to power by “the will of the people.” The spectators react positively. They hail Galba, jump into the arena, and finally storm the palace where Nero is hiding. The approach of the threatening mob is then instrumental in Nero’s suicide and for a moment it seems that the people’s and the soldiers’ goals are identical. A closer look at the arena scene, however, reveals that the convergence of the people’s and the soldier’s goals is created in a rather peculiar way. Marcus and his officer
have planned the revolution for some time but are waiting for the right moment to act. The situation seems favorable when the spectators in the arena side with Marcus and Lygia, demanding their release. But the revolutionary soldiers storm the arena moments before Nero decides against the people’s will and their first attack is not directed against Nero, but against the praetorians threatening Marcus. While the loyal legionaries are still running up to Marcus and Lygia in the middle of the arena, Nero gives a thumbs-down to the victims, causing the populace to rise and side with the soldiers. This arrangement allows the directors to extol the achievements of the individual heroes who fight for justice and freedom while being backed by the people.

The arrangement of these scenes in the 1951 film is indebted to the version of 1925. These are the only films in which Nero, contrary to the novel, condemns Lygia to death. They are also the only versions in which the rebellious soldiers enter the arena before a decision over the girl’s life and death is made. Nero’s mercilessness and brutality mark him as a reckless dictator to the very end (a detail that may have contributed to Mussolini’s displeasure at the film). But while the 1925 film slightly mitigates Nero’s portrayal by having Tigellinus give the first thumbs-down and the emperor merely follow his example, the 1951 Nero does not refer to others when making his decision. Bypassing the people’s and the courtiers’ will (Tigellinus’ reaction is not shown in this version), he gives the order to kill Lygia. Showing clemency or blaming the death sentence on Tigellinus would have been inconsistent with the film’s identification of Nero with a fascist dictator. The end of the 1951 film echoes its beginning, with ordinary people watching Galba’s troops approach Rome on the Appian Way, just as they had watched those of Marcus march on the same road.

On the whole, the common people in the 1951 version have usually only a mediated influence on the course of events. They are easily susceptible to manipulation and change their minds frequently. However, these unsettling features are mitigated because they preserve, albeit in a confused and unorganized way, a certain feeling for justice and courage that can readily be activated if the right people guide the masses wisely. This fuzzy treatment of the people corresponds to the different political subtexts of the film and to the uncertain attitudes of Americans towards the populations of totalitarian countries. The film imagines Rome as a fascist dictatorship, as communist, and as American, at different moments and for different purposes. If Rome is a fascist or communist regime, are the Roman people guilty
participants in its crimes or among its victims? They seem to be both. The film echoes the situation of its time, when De-Nazification had been abandoned in Germany (beginning in 1948), and the needs of the Cold War demanded that Americans accept Germans as partners, and hence more as victims than perpetrators. The Federal Republic of Germany was created in May 1949. At the same time, the ease with which Nero can distract the people from their real enemy, himself, to hatred of the Christians could also evoke McCarthy’s hounding of alleged communists, at its height when the film appeared. The House of Un-American Activities Committee held its first hearings in Hollywood in 1947. Its second, more famous attack on communists, former communists, and alleged communists in the film industry occurred in the spring of 1951, a few months before the film was released, creating a new and unintended context in which it could be interpreted. The distant Roman setting allows the film to show how easily the people can be misled without specifying exactly to whom it refers. Indeed, one of the screenwriters, John Mahin, was a conservative and a supporter of the blacklist; the film’s unease about the people could lead in either direction.

We last see the people as they greet Galba’s army along the road. The conversation between Marcus and Flavius, with its wish for a “more permanent world” and a “more permanent faith” may prompt some optimism about the contemporary political world since the faith, at least, has arrived. Still, the hero, although he takes an active part in bringing Galba to Rome, withdraws from Rome and political life. The audience may well accept this as his due, so that he is like Washington finally returning to Mt. Vernon, but it also underlines the limitations of political solutions.

The 1985 version presents a very different view of the Roman people. On the one hand, it is closer to the novel in that it emphasizes the diversity of the capital’s population: Rome’s streets are full of exotic people wearing exotic garb and pursuing strange occupations. The surprised gaze of Marcus Vinicius introduces us to this world as he returns to Rome after his military service and remembers a letter from his uncle Petronius (read as a voice-over) advising him to “be prepared to find Rome changed.” In the context of the letter, the sentence refers only to the political situation (“Nero has turned Seneca away. People live in fear, holding their breath”) but since we hear it while watching a very unfamiliar ancient Rome, the warning pertains to the spectator as well as to Marcus Vinicius: if we are used to the
The Roman People

classic Hollywood toga movie, we, too, must be prepared “to find Rome changed” in the 1985 series.

In comparison to the 1951 film, mass scenes are relatively rare in the 1985 version. We see the people of Rome mostly in small groups, in very specific environments usually not covered by the big epics. Frequently, the directors take us to the part of the town where the common people live. People are seen doing their laundry, cooking, dying garments, working in mills, and enjoying themselves at the sight of the “strongman” Ursus who breaks chains and lifts huge stones for their amusement. There are also street actors performing a raucous and sometimes vulgar show accompanied by the sound of exotic instruments. While earlier films showed the common people mostly as a background for the adventures of Petronius and Vinicius – that is, from the perspective of the aristocrats – the scenes in the 1985 miniseries (which are only partly found in the novel) are there in their own right. The stronger role of Lygia, for example, allows her to serve as focalizer during some of these new events, such as her encounter with a dance troupe whose main actress looks astonishingly like herself (see p. 73).

The first mass scene is not an official rally but the protest organized by the Christians to oppose the execution of Pedanius Secundus’ slaves. Although Paul announces, in his conversation with Petronius, that he will call on the Christians to go out into the public realm, he himself is not seen during the demonstration, making it a rally of a group of people sharing a common goal rather than a guided protest. While the active participants seem to be Christian, other Romans look on with a mixture of curiosity and confusion. Unlike Nero’s courtiers, however, they do not seem to be particularly alarmed by the protest. The common people are thus both close to and distinct from the Christians, an impression that is underscored during the great fire.

In the 1985 version, we learn about the fire not from a messenger as in the novel and the other films, but from the perspective of the apparently deaf-mute dancing girl, Lygia’s double. In one of the shabbier neighborhoods of Rome, the girl discovers a fire in a woodshed and, with gestures and grimaces, alerts Lygia, who gives her half of her scarf to cover her face from the smoke. Later, Lygia helps her to wet her clothes in a public well where other common people are doing the same to protect themselves from the flames. Ordinary people also fight the blaze in an orderly fashion. They form chains to transport buckets of water effectively to the site of the fire,
they help each other, and they make a joint effort to tear down obstacles blocking the way of the refugees. Unlike in the 1951 version, there is no uncontrollable panic (although people are in one scene falling over each other as they try to escape) and, most strikingly, the populace does not need a strong leader like the 1951 Marcus Vinicius to guide their actions. While the novel and all earlier films used Marcus as the main focal character, he is now one among many (including Lygia, Chilo, and the dancing girl). When Marcus works with other men to tear down a burning barricade, he is only a regular member of the group, neither leading the others nor standing out for his expertise or physical prowess. He does not wear his uniform and does not display any military behavior.

Unlike in the novel and the 1951 film, there is also no indication that Marcus has any suspicion about the cause of the fire. Instead, Chilo first spies a group of men in plainclothes who are busy setting buildings on fire and claim to be foreigners. Later, it is again Chilo who asks Tigellinus if this could really be an ordinary fire. Tigellinus is visibly alarmed but Chilo is smart enough not to utter any concrete suspicion. The first charges against Nero come from a woman who has lost her mind in the inferno and runs around aimlessly, wailing: “I am burning, Nero has set me on fire with the flame of the Vestals! I can’t drink, Nero has poisoned the wells. [...] He is killing us, he has set fire to us. May he be dead! Nero is our enemy! May he be dead!” Since she is obviously out of her mind, her wild accusations do not catch on at first. But, accidentally, Piso and his fellow conspirators overhear the lamentations and quickly decide that “that woman’s words must become everybody’s wish. Rome must accuse Nero.” At this time, the fight for public opinion is already in full swing. Both Nero (who in this series is always wary of a plot against him) and the conspirators (who have so far been hesitant and undecided) perceive the blaze as an opportunity to win the favor of the populace by offering generous support for the homeless and destitute. In a conversation with Acte, Nero explains that the fire was “a gift of the gods,” allowing him to show his generosity and to win the love of the people which will, he believes, ultimately save his life from any conspiracy. “All my enemies,” he declares, “will have the people of Rome against them.”

These thoughts accompany other advantages the fire seems to offer. Although the palace is increasingly affected by smoke, for example, Nero gives orders to let the fire burn on so he can build a new Rome with wide streets and low houses, as he later explains to his architects (this detail is based on Tacitus Ann. 15.43, see above, p. 153). He also studies a
model of the city but, unlike in the 1951 version where Nero is pursuing his architectural dreams long before the fire starts, in the 1985 series the emperor seems to react to the opportunity offered by the catastrophe. Similarly, Nero composes and rehearses the poem about his “grief” only after the fire has broken out and starts to produce a theater play about a burning city while Rome is already in flames. The rehearsals are all held inside the palace where they are not visible to the people. This presentation follows Tacitus, who reports rumors that Nero “recited the fall of Troy on his domestic stage” while the city burned (Tac. Ann. 15.39.3). But while Tacitus also believes that these rumors about the performance were the reason why his relief efforts did not win him the favor of the people, the 1985 version does not establish such a link. The common people in the film do not know about the rehearsal in the palace which takes place with only Acte and Nero’s acting teacher as witnesses. Unlike in the novel and in earlier films, both Nero’s theatrical endeavors and his urban planning, though appearing repeatedly, take up relatively little space compared to his political scheme to derive popularity from the catastrophe.

Shortly after his conversation with Acte, Nero promises a crowd of homeless children in his palace to open his gardens and his fountains for the victims of the fire, and he has silver coins distributed to the people to cries of “the emperor loves you, the emperor is generous.” At the same time, Piso opens his rural villa for the needy and provides them with grain, declaring that “senator Piso shares your suffering.” The people are thus subject to clever manipulation from two opposing political groups, both trying to exploit the catastrophe for their own agenda. While the two are competing, Petronius offers his house and supplies to the needy without trying to influence them politically.

With so many relief efforts in place and no compromising rumors about Nero except for the bizarre lamentations of the mad woman (only Chilo suspects), the people’s increasingly hostile attitude towards the emperor is not a spontaneous outburst of “public anger” as in the novel and the earlier films but cleverly channeled and spread by the conspirators. There are no mass scenes, however, to show the anger of the people. Instead, we learn about the growing dissent only from Nero’s remarks, which are in turn based on information provided by Tigellinus. The prefect of the praetorians, on the other hand, gathers intelligence with the help of informers, of whom the most important (but probably not the only one) is Chilo Chilonides. With their help, Tigellinus arrests and tortures people who were overheard blaming the emperor for the fire.
By avoiding the spectacular mass scenes that dominate Nero’s interaction with the people in the 1951 version, the directors shift the focus on more subtle forms of political manipulation. For a short time, Nero and his allies on the one hand and the conspirators on the other behave in a way not unlike that of modern-day politicians during election campaigns. Promoting relief efforts in crisis situations and overshadowing a political opponent with one’s own generosity is an established means of gaining popularity. The same goes for direct encounters between politicians and victims of catastrophes – preferably in the disaster zone or, when that is impossible as in the burning city of Rome, in a safe place (here represented by the emperor’s palace and the rural villa of Piso). While such competition for the hearts and minds of the needy often turns out favorably for the victims, as the powerful rush to their aid, the film quickly reveals that Nero and Tigellinus are more than willing to use violence should their political campaign not yield the desired results. The new wave of arrests, too, takes place in secret and there is no sign of mass protest or even a reaction among the people.

The more subtle or secret methods of manipulation then quickly give way to a public and aggressive approach. After they have failed to achieve their real goal (suppressing the political opposition by winning over the people), Nero and Tigellinus unleash the persecution of Christians which will allow them to divert the attention of the populace and at the same time to murder opponents under the charge of sympathizing with the Christians – this is at least what Piso and his fellow conspirators fear, after an aristocrat to whom Tigellinus owed money has been threatened and withdraws his claims against the prefect.

The first spectacle is the public performance of Nero’s Troy poem, in which Christians, representing the captive Trojans, are tied to poles and shot by archers. While the actresses playing the Trojan women react, apparently according to the script of the play, with cries of despair, and old men, apparently Christians, run around in a panic, the spectators remain silent and indifferent. Similarly, they do not react to a woman actress who turns to Nero’s throne while imploring Apollo for help. Only when Tigellinus starts to applaud, walking around the stage and animating the people to follow his example, do they clap their hands, but without enthusiasm. Apparently Tigellinus has already managed to establish a regime of terror. Feelings of fear and intimidation, however, are not very prominent in the scene either. What seems to prevail among the populace is a numb indifference.
When the Christians are thrown to the lions, the common people are again seen as the object of manipulation rather than agents. Unlike in the novel and in the earlier films, the spectators do not react collectively to the spectacle. There are single shouts, but no general jeers for the victims, no choruses, and the people do not utter wishes or demands. When the camera, positioned inside the ring of spectators, moves around to show the faces of the audience in close-up, many have a hypnotized look on their faces.

The arena is less inviting for collective reactions, too. All other films set the executions in a huge stone amphitheater evoking the Coliseum (which was in reality built after the end of Nero’s reign), exploiting the chance for spectacle (Plate 5.2 from the 1925 version, and Plate 5.3 from the 1951 film). In these amphitheaters, the arrangement of the seats allows for
spectators to see each other as well as the show. People in both the stands and the arena occasionally interact with the crowd. In the 1925 version, Chilo rushes into the arena where he can be seen by all and delivers a fervent speech to the people accusing Nero of arson. In the 1951 film, a man turns around in his seat and makes his fellow spectators laugh with loud remarks about the lions getting hungry. In the same version, Peter is easily visible in the stands when he blesses the crowd in the arena. In the three earlier films, Marcus Vinicius finally jumps into the arena, takes Lygia in his arms, and delivers a speech that convinces the spectators to turn against Nero.

The 1985 version does not present such interactions and even reduces the people's reactions to the spectacle to a minimum. The people are not sitting cozily in their seats in a stone amphitheater high above the victims.

Plate 5.3  Ustinov’s Nero views the arena. Source: 1951. Producer: Sam Zimbalist, Metro Goldwyn Mayer

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but are standing around a low wooden fence separating the cage with the lions and the victims from the audience. Only the people in the first row are therefore able to see the show properly while people in the back cannot fully participate. When a woman yells at the victims “A Christian! A Christian!” there is no reaction from her fellow spectators. In the bullfight scene, when Ursus first grabs the beast by the horns, there is some clapping and cheering but it never catches on with the crowd. There is no roar from the audience at exciting moments of the fight and, instead of the earlier films’ enthusiastic frenzy when Ursus finally defeats the bull, there is complete silence in the 1985 version. The spectators seem stunned and speechless. A woman clasps her hand to her mouth, others stare at Ursus with open mouths. But nobody demands Lygia’s and Ursus’ freedom: the spectators do not think that they have influence on the events, nor do they seem interested in claiming any.

Even Marcus, who is in the third or fourth row of spectators, has an attentive but passive, distanced look on his face. He does not give the impression that a loved one has just escaped death and he does not jump into the arena to claim her or to stir up emotions against Nero. In fact, there are no public speeches at all (except for the prayer of a Roman priestess opening the games). Everyone seems to be weighted down by an overwhelming dullness that suppresses all emotions. Unlike in the novel and in earlier films, the Christians do not sing, pray, or curse the audience. Even Lygia, whose life is at stake in the bullfight, seems, in this version, to be half unconscious and barely aware of the events. By contrast, Deborah Kerr (who is in a very similar way tied to a pole in the 1951 version) followed Ursus’ every move with expressions of terror, fear, and hope, building up tension for the cathartic joy at Ursus’ and later Marcus Vinicius’ victory.

In the numbed atmosphere of the 1985 miniseries, on the other hand, what was the climax of the story ends in a completely unspectacular way. There are no soldiers to fight Nero and the populace does not rise against the emperor. With the camera resting on Lygia’s exhausted face, we hear a few bars of a harmonious musical score announcing that her ordeal has ended but nobody celebrates. With the primitive arena in a gloomy silence, Tigellinus approaches Lygia, cuts the ropes with which she is bound and declares: “Let her go free. Nero has ordered it.” No reason is given for the emperor’s decision and the bystanders do not seem to take notice of it anyway. When Lygia slides to the ground in exhaustion, Tigellinus murmurs to himself: “No one will ever understand that we were only trying to defend
ourselves.” Lygia is too weak to answer or even to show joy at her release. Tigellinus, Nero, and Petronius are the only ones to be in full possession of their senses.

The pervasive numbness of both the victims and the common people watching them comes closer to our modern understanding of trauma and its effect on people’s psyche and behavior than the description in the novel and the account in any of the film versions. In the novel and the films, the horrendous experience of the burning city, with all the personal loss it involved, does not have any visible effect on the people once the fire is extinguished. Similarly, in the novel, Marcus and Lygia are not bothered too much by the persecution and the deaths of their loved ones once they have reached Sicily. In a letter to Petronius, Marcus writes about their new life: “Oh, what calm, carissime, and what forgetfulness of former fear and suffering! […] Lygia and I talk of past times, which seem a dream to us; but when I think how that dear head was near torture and death, I magnify my Lord with my whole soul, for out of those hands He alone could wrest her.” (QV 72, 524–5).

According to psychological studies, symptoms such as apathy and a feeling of unreality are common during and shortly after a traumatic experience and difficulties in rebuilding one’s inner self may follow later. Although the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress was well known before (the most famous example being World War I veterans suffering from “shell shock”), public interest in the psychological aspects of trauma increased only in the second half of the twentieth century. Numbness is a common first reaction to many kinds of trauma. The modern psychology neatly matches the smaller screen of the miniseries.

While the 1985 series puts the emphasis on the mostly subtle manipulation of public opinion and shows few direct interactions between the people and the emperor, the Polish version of 2001 brings back many of the details familiar from the novel, with a new emphasis on the ordinariness of ancient Roman life. Common people are seen lounging in taverns, working in mills, carrying merchandise, and gossiping. After Lygia has been abducted by the Christians, Chilo, who has been called in to help find the girl, tells Vinicius that, yes, he knows the gist of the abduction story because “half of Rome talks of nothing else.” The people are, however, ethnically less diverse than in the novel. Africans appear most prominently as slaves carrying litters, while they are not seen in the street or in the general crowd (with the exception of a short scene during the arena games.
The first mass scenes of the 2001 film depict the great fire. The news of the blaze reaches the court at Antium, prompting Marcus to rush to the city on horseback. On his way, he encounters refugees traveling with the remnants of their belongings on the Appian Way. While earlier versions depicted the horror of the fire through graphic images of burnt and desperate people, some of whom seemed to have gone mad, the 2001 version limits such graphic images. Instead, the impact of the catastrophe is effectively conveyed by the terrified cries of Marcus’ horse, eyes widened in panic as it spots the flames and the smoke billowing over the city. The scenes inside the burning city take a middle way between the utter helplessness and panic characteristic of the common people in the 1951 film and the scenes of solidarity and organized fire-fighting in the 1985 series. Briefly, people are seen trying to extinguish the flames and there are also moments of panic but the focus remains mostly on Marcus while the common people serve as background for his search. He does not interact with them, either to assume the role as heroic leader as in the Hollywood film or as member of a volunteer group as in the 1985 series.

In the 2001 version, Marcus is clearly the focalizer, notably so when he finally collapses in the street, overcome by smoke and exhaustion. In the novel he is rescued by a group of Christians, in the 1912 film by a group of unidentified volunteers. The 1925 and the 1951 films do not have the scene. While the 1925 film probably leaves it out because it is not relevant to the plot, the 1951 version drops it because it contradicts Marcus’ new role as a strong and fearless leader. The generally more sentimental 1985 series transforms the physical breakdown into a moment of mental anguish when he believes Lygia dead under the rubble of a collapsed house. The 2001 version, on the other hand, only shows those parts of the event in which Marcus is conscious. We see him collapse and we see, in the next scene, a bewildering view of burnt treetops seen from ground level. Chilo’s worried face appears in the frame and it becomes evident that we see through the eyes of Marcus, who has somehow been rescued and transferred to a safe place in the outskirts of Rome. It is very likely that Chilo is his rescuer but we are never explicitly told so.
Presenting the scene this way is in line with the 2001 film’s general tendency to reduce the portrayal of the common people in favor of the main characters. The crowd’s main scene is the confrontation with Nero and the courtiers during the emperor’s performance of his Troy epic which takes place, just as in the novel, on the Appian aqueduct that Nero climbs on his return from Antium. People on their flight on the Via Appia approach the line of praetorians guarding the entrance, shouting “down with the tyrant!” The courtiers are visibly frightened. In contrast to the 1951 and the 1985 films, not Tigellinus but one of the civilians around Nero asks for the praetorians to crush the mob. Tigellinus, on the other hand, suggests making promises and, when Petronius finally goes down to calm the enraged populace, he quickly succeeds by promising them wheat, wine, olives, and games. This corresponds to the novel: the people calm down, greeting Nero with joyous shouts.

The scene then changes to the baptism of Marcus before returning to a dismayed Nero musing over the greedy rabble of Rome. It is not clear how or why the people’s mind has again turned against the emperor and the 2001 film does not bother to explain their change of mind. (The Polish audience might know the novel well enough to fill in the gap.) Anxious about the development, Nero then quickly pursues the idea put forward by Tigellinus (on Poppaea’s instigation) to blame the Christians for the fire. It is not clear how the accusations are spread among the people but they are very successful: shortly after, soldiers drag Christian women from their home by their hair, tie them to trees and tear their clothes in what seems a sexual assault. Soldiers and civilians roam the streets of Rome, shouting “Christians to the lions,” and a drunken legionary even threatens Petronius’ life if he does not join in.

Given the general unrest and widespread hostility, the reactions of the people in the amphitheater are relatively subdued. They are not numbed as in the 1985 version but there are also no deafening roars and frenetic cheers as in the 1951 film. The spectators whistle and protest when the Christians kneel down to pray in the arena and they cheer when a man trying to climb the barricades and escape to safety is snatched by a lion. The ensuing mass crucifixion in the arena does not draw even this subdued applause. The people are mostly quiet and when Peter, who is in the stands, gets up to bless the dying and greet them with “peace to the martyrs” (although he does not do so in the booming voice of his 1951 counterpart), there are no distinctive reactions even from his immediate neighbors.
Instances of criticism occur only later when the Christians are being burned in the imperial gardens and Chilo, unable to stand the sight, steps forward and accuses Nero. People join his charges with shouts of “Nero the arsonist,” causing the court to flee in a hurry. The unrest does not last, however. Chilo is quickly arrested and brutally tortured by Tigellinus while the games continue.

The next day in the arena when Lygia is tied to the wild bull, people follow the spectacle in the same mood as before and there is no evidence that Chilo’s accusations have had a lasting effect. When Ursus comes into the arena, there is applause but we get little reaction from the spectators during the fight itself. After Ursus has killed the beast, people applaud and watch approvingly as Marcus Vinicius jumps into the arena, covers Lygia with his toga, and demands her release. The first spectator to raise his thumb as a plea for mercy is, however, not a common man, but Petronius. Common people follow his example, calling unanimously for Ursus and Lygia to be freed but there is no sign that their request is connected to some grievance against Nero, as it is in the novel.23

The emperor, after some moments of hesitation during which Tigellinus tries to convince him not to give in, finally agrees to free Lygia and Ursus (as he does in the novel). In an innovation, however, he then quickly decides that Peter and Paul should be executed, probably in retaliation. Petronius warns Vinicius about Nero’s plan so he can advise the apostles to flee. We do not know if Nero is planning to make his decision public but at any rate he does not seem to fear negative reactions from the common populace.

Similarly, the arrival of Galba that ends Nero’s reign is detached from the common people. While the 1912 version had Galba ride into the arena and the 1951 film featured an acclamation by the crowd, the 2001 film shows the new emperor being greeted exclusively by soldiers. The flight of Nero on horseback, too, takes place in an empty landscape without any reference to common people. Generally, the peculiar representation of the masses in the 2001 Polish version is due to its closer fidelity to the novel and to its focalization through the eyes of the main characters which overshadows the references to marginal groups. Since the film links the fall of Nero to the end of communism, the Romans are at one level the Polish people and the film does not make them too exotic. Yet the film does not make the people their own liberators. Clearly, the Christians are the most “Polish” characters and the nation and church are closely linked.
Notes

1 Juvenal famously complains that Rome has become a Greek city and that “long ago the Syrian river Orontes has flown into the Tiber” (Sat. 3.60–2). The multitude of foreign languages and customs is criticized in the same passage (63–5).

2 The memory of the Gallic catastrophe is also brought up by Cassius Dio, 62.17.3 (Sienkiewicz probably did not know this). The model for both might have been Pliny, see Koestermann 1963: 245.

3 During the partition of Poland, both Prussian and Russian law strictly regulated the use of the Polish language. In 1885, Russian, which had been made the obligatory language in all secondary schools in the mid 1860s, became the obligatory language in all elementary schools as well. A Russian language university replaced the academic Polish “Main School” in Warsaw in 1869. In the Prussian-occupied West, after the German unification in 1871, German was made the exclusive language of courts, local administration and later (in 1887) of all schools except for religious instruction, cp. Lukowski and Zawadzki 2001: 156–7. Multiple languages also remained a trademark after the reunification of Poland in 1918. The Polish 1931 census included eight different languages on the national territory (Polish, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Belorussian, German, Russian, Lithuanian and Ruthenian) plus a category called “local” (declared by 707,000 Belorussian speakers in Polesie as their mother tongue) and an unspecified group of “others.” See Lukowski and Zawadzki 2001: 207.

4 When Poles in Russia took the occasion of the Russian–Japanese war to rise against foreign domination in 1905, Sienkiewicz, fearing for the moral and religious principles endangered by armed resistance, published the novel Wiry (Whirlpools). For this anti-revolutionary novel, see Giergielewicz 1968: 122–3.

5 Sienkiewicz, though born in the eastern province under Russian domination, took vivid interest in the fate of the western parts of Poland. While working for the daily newspaper Słowo, of which he had become editor in 1882, he traveled to the west to see for himself the conditions of Polish peasants under Prussian rule. See Giergielewicz 1968: 32.

6 QV 36, 287: “There were seen harps, Grecian lutes, lutes of the Hebrews and Egyptians, lyres, forminges, citharas, flutes, long, winding buffalo horns and cymbals.” The passage also seems to be inspired by Juvenal: in the same passage cited in note 1, the poet complains that the oriental immigrants in Rome had brought with them foreign flutes, curved harps, and cymbals.

7 The intertitle accompanying the people’s march on the Palatine reads: “To the Palatine! Nero will punish the incendiaries.”

8 The time of these events is greatly compressed (see Chapter 2).
9 During a heated discussion, Petronius surprises the athletic Vinicius with a sudden steel grip on his arm (QV 6, 44). Chilo admires the strength of Ursus (QV 24, 19), and Lygia is dazzled by Vinicius’ youth and strength (QV 7, 57–8).

10 The most famous incident is probably that of Julius Caesar’s soldiers mocking him as a “bald adulterer” (moechus calvus).

11 Orestes and Alcmaeon, in Greek mythology, both killed their mothers. The slur against Nero is reported by Suetonius, Nero 39.2.

12 For the possible allusion to Nazism in this greeting, see Winkler 1998: 179–80.

13 Caligula once wished the Romans had only one neck (Suet. Gaius 30); the remark has often been misattributed to Nero. Winkler 2001: 64.


15 That Nero used an emerald as a looking glass is reported by Pliny, N.H. 37.64. It has become a well-known detail in the films, where attention is drawn to it by showing the banquet partly from Nero’s perspective, in a greenish light and with a slightly distorted image.

16 In an assembly discussing the problems and opportunities of thousands of World War II veterans returning to the American job market, Maj. Gen. William F. Tompkins declared on October 9, 1944 that “these men are the pick of our young manhood. They have gained knowledge and maturity and that sense of respect for their fellows that comes only when men face death side by side. […] Their intelligence, experience and courage will make them leaders in their generation and a priceless asset to the nation they defended.” A speech by Brig. Gen. Frank T. Hines published in the same article runs along similar lines (the quotation is taken from the text published by the New York Times on October 10, 1944).

17 Shortly after the fire, when Peter thanks Marcus for helping Lygia and the people during the blaze, Marcus candidly admits that “my only concern is for Lygia.” This is not, however, entirely consistent with his relief efforts during the blaze.

18 Suetonius points out that the people were forced to camp out in public monuments and gravesites during the six days of the blaze but he does not suggest that these temporary shelters were part of Nero’s relief effort (Nero 38.2).

19 During Ursus’ fight with the bull, Nero told Poppaea, in what is probably intended as a cruel joke, that if Ursus killed the wild beast, he would spare Lygia “for Vinicius – to breed more Christians.” His thumbs-down at the end of the fight is therefore a breach of his promise which makes the death sentence even more unjust.

20 W. Gurian commented that “Denazification is now mentioned only as an example of the complete failure of a policy” in Commonweal on November 9, 1951 (111–12) – two weeks before the magazine reviewed Quo Vadis.
22 In psychology, the victim’s seemingly emotionless observation of events is referred to as “monitoring”; see Miller 1980.
23 QV 65, 502: (people in the arena hold up their thumbs demanding Lygia’s release): “Now rage began to possess the multitude. Dust rose from beneath the stamping feet, and filled the amphitheater. In the midst of shouts were heard cries: ‘Ahenobarbus! matricide! incendiary!’”
Religion and Religious Authority in *Quo Vadis?*

**Paganism**

In Sienkiewicz’s novel, traditional Roman religion has little influence on attitudes and behavior. Pagan gods are mentioned frequently but people rarely take them seriously.¹ The novel sometimes describes rituals, as when a centurion pours a libation for Mars (QV 50, 350), but they express cultural tradition rather than spiritual commitment. While the Christians worship with love, “Those who still rendered honor to the old gods did so to gain aid for themselves or through fear” (QV 20, 164). The novel does not refer to the minor and rural gods who were so often a focus of Roman sentiment and it mentions the household gods only in passing. When Vinicius first observes Peter preaching at the Ostrianum, “that ‘fisherman,’ too, seemed to him, not like some high priest skilled in ceremonial . . . ,” that is, not like the priests with whom he is familiar (QV 20, 165). More often, pagans are troubled or attracted by non-official religious practices and superstitions, such as magic and sorcery. Poppaea is worried that Lygia might have cast the evil eye on her daughter, causing the child’s death, and Marcus wonders whether Lygia has cast a love charm on him.²

Apart from these religious practices, the novel gives most attention to the atheistic worldview of Petronius. Petronius does not believe in the gods but honors them because it is the custom. He announces in his last letter to Vinicius that he admires only two philosophers: Pyrrho, the founder of Skepticism, and Anacreon, the hedonistic poet (QV 72, 527). Petronius is a Skeptic.³ Otherwise, he judges good and bad aesthetically. Sienkiewicz marginalizes the stoicism of Seneca which had enough outward similarities to Christianity to inspire a forged correspondence between him and Paul (probably from the fourth century).⁴ The narrator blames Seneca for...
lacking “strength of soul” and of having acquiesced in crime (QV 5, 41),
while referring many times to his wealth, comparing him unfavorably to
(L. Annaeus) Cornutus and Thrasea (Paetus). So there are evidently virtu-
ous Stoics in Rome but none of them actually plays any part in the story.
Vinicio mentions having had Musonius Rufus as a teacher (QV 2, 26) but
Stoicism has clearly had no influence on him at all. At the beginning of
Peter’s sermon, Vinicius finds it stale, reminiscent of the teachings of the
Stoics, Cynics, and Socrates (QV 20, 165–6).

Sorcery is especially prominent in the 1925 film where Nero goes to see
a fortuneteller because he is troubled by unsettling dreams. The soothsayer,
an old woman, resembles a medieval witch: she lives in a gloomy room
surrounded by animals (familiars) and uses a crystal ball. Although witches
are part of Roman folklore, brewing up potions from disgusting ingredients
and conjuring the ghosts of the deceased, they do not primarily foretell the
future and never use a crystal ball. The presentation is here designed to
inform the modern audience that the woman is evil, possibly in alliance
with supernatural evil powers, and trying to harm the innocent. Having
Nero seek guidance from a witch marks him, too, as an evil character who
defies not only human but also divine laws.

In folktale, witches, scary and powerful as they are, do not defeat good
forces so that Nero is shown as simultaneously dangerous and doomed.
The 1925 version reinforces this theme by adding a second scene not
found in the novel. After Lygia’s fellow Christians free her from Petronius’
litter, she is hidden in the basement of an apparently abandoned house.
Nero spots her on his way back from his visit to the witch and tries to
seduce her. Lygia is finally rescued by Ursus and his friends who carry
her off to a new hideout. The dialogue between Lygia and the emperor
imitates the temptation of Jesus in the desert, with Nero promising Lygia
the riches of the world and demanding a god-like status (“Be mine, and
all the treasures of the world are thine. I will make thee an empress. [. . .]
I am thy god. Let thine defend thee”). It is the second time in this film
that Nero shows erotic interest in Lygia. Shortly before, in his palace,
he tried to rape her and was stopped only when the jealous Poppaea,
alarmed by Petronius, came to her rescue. The scene is probably an
adaptation of the accusations reported by Suetonius (and briefly men-
tioned by Sienkiewicz, QV 31, 258) that Nero had raped the Vestal
Virgin Rubria (Suet. Nero 28.1). In transferring the attempted rape from
Rubria to Lygia, Sienkiewicz emphasizes the Christian girl’s innocence
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and purity. At the same time, the image of the pure virgin threatened by a squalid old man like Nero is repulsive to a wide variety of spectators, even to those who recognize neither the Suetonian background nor the allusion to the gospel.

In the 1951 version, too, pagan religion plays a marginal role. Priestesses open public celebrations, such as the victory parade of Marcus Vinicius and the arena games, with prayers but we do not see private people perform religious ceremonies. In conversations, the characters rarely use a god’s name. While people in the novel sometimes exclaim “by the body of Isis” or simply shout the name of a god to express surprise or anger, the characters in the 1951 film usually limit themselves to an unspecific “by the body of . . .” When Petronius uses the full phrase, he does not say “the body of Isis” but “the body of Juno,” replacing the invocation of an oriental goddess with a Roman one. This shift is in line with the 1951 film’s general tendency to reduce the foreign elements so prominent in the novel’s description of Rome.

By comparison, the 1985 film emphasizes Roman priests and priestesses. Not only do they open the show in the arena but they try to heal the sick child of Nero, perform a ritual of purification for the city, and preside over the interrogations of potential opponents: they are present during the house trial of Pomponia Graecina as well as during the investigation against the Christians, and the execution in the arena has a distinctly religious character absent from the novel. Nero, although himself the chief priest of Rome, at one point employs an Egyptian witch doctor to perform an exorcism on him.

The rituals performed by the priests are for the most part not modeled on ancient Roman customs. Instead, they appeal to a modern audience’s experience with religious and quasi-religious practices. The priests who try to heal the sick child, for example, have astrological symbols painted on their hands that resemble symbols from medieval and early modern astronomy and astrology. The purification ritual after the fire, which is conducted by the priests and consists of a procession through Rome, the recitation of prayers, and the burning of incense (carried in a censer), is apparently modeled on the Catholic tradition of public processions sometimes held as an act of penance during or after a catastrophic event. In contrast, the little boys with red garments and shaved heads who accompany the priests to the house of Petronius resemble young monks in a Buddhist monastery.
The only ritual with an ancient background in the 1985 series is the *tripudium*, an oracle based on the appetite of sacred hens, performed in the house of Petronius to determine if the gods are favorable to his investigation of the murder of Pedanius Secundus. The result of the ceremony is to be reported to Nero as *pontifex maximus*. It quickly turns out, however, that neither Petronius nor Eunice believes in the ritual. Eunice admits that she has secretly strewn extra corns to assure a favorable outcome of the ritual that will gain Petronius the support of the populace. Petronius himself is not at all annoyed about this falsification but warns Eunice that she could be whipped if the priests find out.

Apart from the Roman religion practiced by the priests, a number of unofficial cults and practices appear in the film, such as those of the soothsayers who offer their services to Marcus as he returns from the campaign in the east. He finally agrees to visit the oracle of Mopsus, an obscure institution in which a boy foretells the future. The boy sits in a niche in an underground cave, loosely resembling a statue of Buddha, while his servants wear fantastic costumes that do not resemble any known religious tradition but are probably based on Fellini’s *Satyricon*. This scene is borrowed from the novel in which Marcus mentions a visit to the oracle of Mopsus where he slept in the temple and dreamt that the god told him that love would change his life (*QV* 1, 10) but the novel does not imply anything weird about the oracle.

Finally, the 1985 series is full of individual superstition, some of which is taken from ancient sources (Nero, for example, wears a bracelet made of snakeskin, cp. Suet. *Nero* 6.4). Petronius thinks it possible that the mysterious flute he hears in his house is an omen like the flute of Orpheus, which, he says, used to play when something was about to happen. As in the novel, Lygia is accused by the nurse of bewitching Nero’s daughter but in addition she is also shunned by the imperial slaves who are forbidden to talk to her and show a superstitious fear that her evil influence might harm them.

The film’s representation of paganism thus identifies it with the exotic; it is orientalized. Yet it is not clear that this representation distances the audience from the Roman past since both exotic religions and superstitious practices have been and are so prominent in both Europe and North America. Only three years after the 1985 miniseries appeared, Nancy Reagan’s reliance on astrology was a significant scandal. Hari Krishnas were a familiar sight in the airports of the 1980s. Followers of the Bhagwan, Rajneesh Chandra Mohan Jain, achieved a sinister prominence.
when they deliberately caused a large outbreak of salmonella in Oregon in 1984. Roman religion in the film thus evokes the non-mainstream religions of the times. Romans seem to be spiritually adrift, seeking solace and guidance in strange practices because they are uncertain of their civilization, while Christianity (with the exception of Crispus) seems reassuringly normal.

The 2001 Polish film is more reserved in the representation of paganism: there are no priestesses or colleges of priests and there are no oracles or witches. The only instance of blatant superstition is the idea that Lygia has bewitched Nero’s child. Otherwise, names of pagan gods appear mainly in exclamations (Chilo calls Vinicius “Jove” after he has given him some money; Nero calls on Athene and Persephone when pretending that the Christians have burnt Rome) or in at least partly metaphorical speech, as when Marcus wishes Petronius the blessings of Asclepius and Cypris, knowing well that Petronius as a Skeptic does not believe in the pagan gods. Temples occasionally form part of the mise-en-scène but no rituals take place in them. In the 2001 version, western civilization, in which Poland claims membership, is the heir of pagan Rome and so it does not orientalize its own cultural ancestors.

The films, even more than the novel, marginalize philosophy. In none does Petronius have a philosophical basis for his refined hedonism. In the 1925 film, Chilo is said to be “posing as a philosopher.” In the 1951 version, Lucan and Seneca are prominent courtiers; they are sympathetic characters, despite their subservience to Nero, but Seneca never explains his beliefs. Petronius tells Eunice at his death that if the Christians are right, their parting may be brief. This detail directly contradicts Tacitus’ account, in which Petronius pointedly does not talk about the afterlife – that is, he chooses not to die like a philosopher. Tacitus sets the suicide of Petronius in direct contrast to the Stoic suicide of Seneca (Ann. 15.62–4) but the 1951 film makes Seneca the chief witness of Petronius’ death and mitigates its anti-philosophical nature. While this more serious Petronius is a more sympathetic character for the modern audience, he is also not genuinely opposed to conventional virtue. Seneca and Lucan are again characters in the 1985 miniseries but they are thoroughly politicized as part of the Pisonian conspiracy. Seneca is a friend of Petronius and a thoughtful man (he refuses to be the conspirators’ candidate for emperor because he recognizes their impure motives) but he does not represent an alternate guide to life or understanding of the world.
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There is, however, one respect in which both the novel and the films faithfully and respectfully show the attitudes of the Roman pagan elite. The novel does not criticize Petronius for killing himself to spite Nero, or Eunice for choosing to die with her lover. Nor do any of the films, even though no form of Christianity condones suicide. In the 1951 version, Petronius says before his death, “I understand the Christians say that death is but a transition to a better life. It will be interesting to discover...” Suicide is thus almost Christianized. The 1951 film continues with an extended presentation, first of Nero’s histrionic grief when he is told of Petronius’ death and then of his tantrum when he reads Petronius’ final letter. Petronius’ death is rhetorically powerful. Near the film’s end, the spectator is encouraged to despise Nero for his inability to stab himself. In none of the films, even the strongly Catholic 2001 Polish version, is there any suggestion that suicide is wrong; Petronius’ death, which takes place in all of them, is consistently shown with sympathy and dignity, while Nero’s, which appears in all but the 1985 miniseries, is contemptible because of his self-pity and cowardice.

Judaism

While Chilo’s testimony against the Christians in the novel is based on his hatred for Lygia, Vinicius, and Petronius, the rabbis who introduce him to Nero represent something quite different. They slander Christians out of resentment of the rival religion. The novel has prepared both for the slander against Christians and for the role of the Jews in it. Jews appear in the list of the foreigners who crowd Rome (QV 1, 17–18) – a list obviously dependent on Juvenal, Satire 3. They are a small part of the cityscape, and Sienkiewicz’s list of foreigners does not breathe the disgust of his source. Yet the novel is permeated with traditional Christian anti-Semitism since it consistently emphasizes the hostility of the Jews as a people to the Christians. References to the life of Jesus pair “the Jews” and the Roman soldiers as those who insulted and killed Christ (e.g., QV 20, 167), priming the Christian reader’s expectations about their fundamental perfidiousness.

The place of Jews in the novel’s world is confused. The novel clearly rejects racial anti-Semitism. Romans are wrong to see people of Jewish
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origin as inferior; Vinicius, jealous of Nazarius, reminds Lygia that Greeks call Nazarius’ people “Jewish dogs” (QV 27, 222). Lygia rebukes him, since Nazarius is “a Christian, and my brother”; Vinicius’ anti-Semitism here is akin to his social snobbery. Although the Jewish origins of Peter are not stressed, those of Paul are: Petronius calls Paul “my little Jew.” Indeed, Paul is at one point almost mistaken for Chilo (QV 27, 227). The novel stresses his ugliness along with his greatness.

However, if Romans are contemptuous of Jews, they believe the worst about Christians. When Chilo tells Petronius that Lygia is a Christian, he responds: “‘This signifies,’ said Petronius, ‘that Pomponia and Lygia poison wells, murder children caught on the street, and give themselves up to dissoluteness!’” (QV 14, 124). It thus appears that Romans recognize Christians as a distinct group of criminal cultists. Yet Petronius writes to Vinicius that he has asked the Jewish actor Aliturus about the difference between Jews and Christians:

I asked him, by the way, as a Jew, if Christians and Jews were the same. He answered that the Jews have an eternal religion, but that Christians are a new sect risen recently in Judea; that in the time of Tiberius the Jews crucified a certain man, whose adherents increase daily, and that the Christians consider him as God. They refuse, it seems, to recognize other gods, ours especially. I cannot understand what harm it would do them to recognize these gods. (QV 15, 131)

This passage oddly attributes only to Christians the peculiar monotheism that was well-known to ancient intellectuals as characteristic of Jews. Yet Sienkiewicz has the wicked rabbis courageously defend their refusal to treat Nero as a god (QV 49, 376). Elsewhere, Petronius says that Poppaea “follows the religion of the Jews, and believes in evil spirits” (QV 12, 104). Vinicius assumes that his Jewish slaves can tell him magical ways to cause ulcers in his enemies (QV 11, 94). Romans associate Judaism with magic and it is not clear whether they are wrong.

Later remarks imply that the Jews are the source of the false beliefs about Christians so that they become co-persecutors (just as they are in the references to the Crucifixion). On his way to hear Peter and kidnap Lygia, Vinicius asks Chilo why the Christians worship secretly when the Jews congregate openly:

The Jews, lord, are their bitterest enemies. I have heard that, before the present Caesar’s time, it came to war, almost, between Jews and Christians.
Those outbreaks forced Claudius Caesar to expel all the Jews, but at present that edict is abolished.\textsuperscript{13} The Christians, however, hide themselves from Jews, and from the populace, who, as is known to thee, accuse them of crimes and hate them. (\textit{QV} 20, 162)

There are further references to Jewish persecution and slander of Christians (\textit{QV} 32, 260; 45, 347). When Chilo (who has a Jewish mother and has been introduced by the rabbis) accuses the Christians before Poppaea, he says: that “Chrestos” promised that when Rome was destroyed by fire, Christians would rule the earth. Christians are the enemies of all humanity (\textit{QV} 49, 377). The Roman crowd believes similar slanders and is happy to see the Christians brought into the arena. Romans, apparently, do not know the exact difference between Jews and Christians, and despise Jews, but nonetheless believe Jewish lies about Christians.

The rabbis make particular accusations against the Christians: “We, lord, accuse them of this alone – that they are enemies of the law, of the human race, of Rome, and of thee; that long since they have threatened the city and the world with fire!” (\textit{QV} 49, 376). These charges reflect structural problems and concerns between the two streams of Judaism about to evolve into separate religions.\textsuperscript{14} The Christians are enemies of the Jewish religion as represented by the temple or the law.\textsuperscript{15} The charges reveal the true motives behind the rabbis’ hostility. The rest of their accusation, however, Sienkiewicz has based on Tacitus who refers to the Christians accused of starting the fire as “convicted not so much on the charge of arson as for hatred of the human race” (\textit{odio humani generis}).\textsuperscript{16}

Yet there is no trace of Tacitus’ comments on Jews which echo both his descriptions of Christians and the charge of sexual dissoluteness that appears as anti-Christian slander in the novel:

These religious practices [sc. of the Jews], however they were introduced, are defended by their antiquity; their other customs, perverse and repellent, have prevailed by their wickedness. The worst people, scorning their ancestral religions, brought them contributions and offerings. Thus the wealth of the Jews grew, also because among themselves personal reliability is absolute and pity at the ready, though towards all others they have hatred suitable to enemies (\textit{adversus omnis alios hostile odium}). They are separate at meals, they sleep apart, and although the nation is extremely intense in its sexual appetites (\textit{proicetissima ad libidinem gens}), they keep away from sex with foreign women; among themselves nothing is forbidden. (\textit{Hist.} 5.5)
In the world of the novel, Romans may dislike Jews and associate them with magic but they do not seem to believe that they are enemies of humanity or peculiarly vicious, although these slanders are attested in ancient sources. Instead, Sienkiewicz refers to the slander that Christians worship an ass. This picks up a longstanding charge brought by pagans against both Jews and Christians. Ass-worship was attributed to the Jews already in the Hellenistic period and Tacitus Hist. 5.3–4 gives an explanation for it.\(^{17}\) As Tertullian recognizes (Apologia 16), this accusation was made against Christians precisely because it was a familiar slander against Jews.\(^{18}\)

For the accusations cited by Chilo (murder of children, worshiping an ass, illegal ritual practices), Sienkiewicz draws on a variety of charges brought against early Christians. Most of them are, however, attested only after Nero’s times and are not linked to the historical conflict between Jews and Christians. The earliest testimony for a blood libel against the Christian community, for example, is found in the first apology of Justin Martyr (26), written around 150 CE.\(^{19}\)

The novel, as the quotations above show, refers several times to the Claudian edict expelling the Jews from Rome in 49 CE (see note 13). The background to this edict is difficult and scholars have often understood it, as Sienkiewicz does, as an attempt to deal with disturbances caused by Jewish–Christian conflict in Rome. Yet the novel’s references to it imply that the Jews were the sole aggressors and the Christians in the novel, with the exception of Crispus, are so pacific and gentle that the reader has to assume that they could not have done anything to provoke trouble.

Similarly, there is no evidence that the persecution under Nero was in any way linked to the Jewish–Christian conflict. We have already noted in the first chapter (above, p. 19), that Sienkiewicz relied on Ernest Renan’s *L’Antichrist*, which he used extensively as a book of reference.\(^{20}\) Renan states that Poppaea favored the Jews and probably “followed some of their rituals.”\(^{21}\) Then he puts forward a full-fledged conspiracy theory, according to which Roman Jews, some of whom worked as actors at the court (such as Aliturus), were behind the persecution of the Christians.\(^{22}\) There is, however, no clear evidence for this speculation, and Renan himself immediately admits that “every speculation is dangerous with a character as bizarre as Nero.” Sienkiewicz, too, although borrowing this idea, does not fully embrace it. The Jews are not the central agents of the events but only a minor factor among many personal
motivations. Yet precisely because their intervention is unnecessary for
the plot, it seems that its main purpose is to include the Jews among
the villains.

As we have already suggested, in the two silent versions, Chilo’s app-
pearance implicitly codes him as Jewish; he could be Shylock or Fagin.
Jews play no explicit roles in these films, however. In the 1925 version,
the plot changes that remove Crispus and Glaucus also leave the final
evaluation of Chilo open. In the novel and the 1912 film, he is forgiven
by the dying Glaucus, then meets Paul and is baptized before his death
(Plate 6.1). In the 1925 version, he is cursed by a dying woman and
denounces Nero in the arena. Nero then shoots an arrow through him. If
his declaration of the truth is noble – an intertitle calls him “the prosecutor”
– his attempt to turn the crowd against Nero is not successful. Indeed,
they seem to enjoy the spectacle as the lions eat his corpse. The film seems to leave to the viewer's judgment whether Chilo has redeemed his earlier false denunciation, or the curse is valid.

By eliminating the testimony of the rabbis and all other references to Judaism, the films reduce the conflict to a tension between pagans and Christians only. It is not surprising that the postwar versions remove the anti-Semitic elements, including the stereotypical appearance of Chilo. More remarkably, however, these films stress the Jewish background of Christianity.

Indeed, the 1951 version has Paul describe himself to Marcus as “a Jew” and “a rabbi.” Not surprisingly, the unsophisticated Marcus of this film has no idea what a rabbi is, and Paul glosses it as “a teacher” (very possibly, many of the film’s viewers would not have known very clearly what “rabbi” meant, either). Here the purpose would seem to be to emphasize Christianity’s closeness to Judaism. Such an emphasis fits neatly with the portrayal of Marcus as a conscientious officer in the Roman army since the military was an important force in forming the American Judeo-Christian tradition.23 Paul might seem an odd choice to represent the shared values of such a tradition. His relation to Judaism continues to be an area of scholarly controversy. Interpreters disagree, for example, about the extent to which his teaching urges respect for Jewish law, whether by Jewish or Gentile Christians, and about whether he regarded faith in Mosaic law as leading to salvation for Jews, even without Christ.24 He is, however, unmistakably the “Apostle to the Gentiles” and not a figure Jews have considered as Jewish. Sienkiewicz, however, emphasizes Paul’s Jewish origins as he does not emphasize Peter’s, and both novel and film ignore Paul’s actual role in shaping early Christianity: the novel stresses his importance but simply as a great apostle.

Furthermore, the Paul in the 1951 film is an intellectual and thus conforms to a (positive) American Jewish stereotype.25 When he introduces Peter at the Christians’ gathering, he emphasizes that it is understandable if some have doubts and questions and so are not ready for baptism yet, and he speaks of how Jesus answered questions. The film’s audience will associate Paul’s remarks with Vinicius and with his hesitation to become a Christian until very late in the film; but it also plays against the Protestant stereotype of Catholicism as a denomination of dogma that demands unquestioning acceptance – a stereotype that was far stronger before Vatican II. Jews sometimes claim that Judaism is more tolerant of doubt
and less dogmatic than Christianity, so that Paul’s welcoming of doubt brings different forms of Christianity together and makes Christianity seem less distant from Judaism. The film minimizes the differences between Judaism and Christianity, just as it minimizes the differences within Christianity, in a way typical of its time. Indeed, Peter concludes his sermon by saying that Jesus also enjoined his followers to keep “the Law of Moses” and tells them to obey the secular authority, love one another, and turn the other cheek, and he quotes the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3–12). He thus implies that the ethical tenets of the “Law of Moses” are the same as those of Christianity and he blurs the distinction.

The 1985 version associates Jewish scriptures with the new religious ideas arriving in Rome since Petronius is said in the first episode to have taken an interest in the Pentateuch that Seneca has sent him. Petronius is acutely aware of Paul’s Jewishness in the episode in which Paul visits him to ask that he intervene on behalf of the slaves of Pedanius. Again, the effect is to blur the distinction between Jew and Christian (in this version, the association between the persecution of the Christians and the Holocaust is unmistakable; see pp. 106–7). Similarly, Christians in the series look to their Jewish heritage for guidance when they put a red mark on their doorposts, believing Crispus’ announcement that the burning of Rome constitutes a divine punishment like the Egyptian plagues. In the same scene, Christians with head coverings are seen swaying in mournful prayer before the wall of a house. This detail is reminiscent of modern Jewish prayer at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Rather than depicting historical reality, it serves to remind the modern spectator of the connection between Judaism and Christianity.

In the 2001 Polish version, however, the Christians address not Paul but Peter as “rabbi” when they beg him to leave Rome (this is in the novel, QV 68, 512). The allusion to the Jewish basis of Christianity in the 2001 film superficially resembles that in the 1951 version. Yet it is quite different. It is attached to Peter, who is in this film more than in any of the others the founder of the modern papacy. He is thus the predecessor of John Paul II (in whose presence the film had its premiere), who repeatedly stressed the ties between Judaism and Christianity and sought to improve Catholic–Jewish relations. Calling Peter “rabbi,” therefore, does not work to blur the Jewish–Christian distinction, as the term does in the 1951 Hollywood film, but to stress the Jewish origin of Christianity as the basis for a positive and respectful relationship.
Christianity: Ritual, Theology,
and Conflict in Sienkiewicz’s Novel

Peter and Paul teach the dominant form of Christianity in Sienkiewicz’s novel and, contrary to the historical record, they are always in precise agreement with each other. Crispus, a stern character who applies rules very strictly, represents a more radical branch. He calls for repentance and warns of the wrath of God (e.g. *QV* 45, 349–50). Peter rebukes him when he speaks harshly to Lygia (*QV* 27, 227–8) and, when he warns the Christians of judgment immediately before their execution, Paul again rebukes him (*QV* 57, 455–6). Both times, he acknowledges that he has sinned. Both apostles stand for charity and forgiveness, while harsh and puritanical attitudes are acknowledged but defined as wrong and eccentric. Although Pomponia is said to be in anguish over her husband’s and son’s paganism and fears “a moment of separation might come which would be a hundred times more grievous and terrible than that temporary one over which they were both suffering then” (*QV* 4, 36), and while Lygia is filled with compassion at the “sentence of condemnation” that hangs over the unconverted Vinicius (*QV* 27, 224), it is exceptional in the novel for any character other than Crispus to fear their own or another’s damnation. Paul’s belief in the imminence of the return of Christ is suppressed and Crispus alone shows any hint of apocalyptic expectations. Furthermore, in both the novel and the films, internal problems of the fledgling Christian community are limited to the confrontation between the mainstream as represented by Peter and Paul and a radical margin represented by Crispus. The structural and theological problems confronted by the early Christian community are not mentioned at all.

Although Christianity is central to the plot, relatively little attention is paid to its rites and liturgy or to more complex theological teachings. The only significant religious ritual is baptism, performed on Marcus Vinicius (by Peter) and on Chilo (by Paul). Apart from that, religious customs remain unspecific. Christian elders in the novel do not wear ritual garments and do not carry religious objects. According to Barron 2005, this reflects Sienkiewicz’s desire to avoid the blatant anachronisms frequently found in other nineteenth-century novels about early Christianity. Projecting later rituals back to the time of the apostles is especially popular with apologetic and edifying novels that seek to justify contemporary practices with their
antiquity. By contrast, *Quo Vadis?* avoids most religious rites that would be understandable only in retrospect.

But even when early Christian practice is described in the New Testament, Sienkiewicz sometimes chooses not to include it in his narrative. There are no obvious offices within the community (although at least the congregation of Jerusalem did have deacons for social services: see *Acts* 6:3–4). And although Christians nurse the sick and injured and pray for them, there is no ritual anointing of the sick as recommended by James (5:14). Furthermore, in *Quo Vadis?* the apostles do not perform miraculous healings, as mentioned in *Acts* (3:1ff., 14:8ff., 16:16ff., 20:7) and sometimes included in other novels on early Christianity.

Most surprisingly, when describing Christian worship, the novel focuses on prayers, hymns, and sermons while the central rite of breaking the bread is left out. The prominence of the sermons is especially striking since the novel was first published in three newspapers of predominantly Catholic Poland. Especially after the Reformation, the Catholic Church emphasized that sermons, the core of Protestant services, were less important than the Eucharist. In mass, sermons could be dropped on specific occasions without making the service invalid but the breaking of the bread could (and can) not. Only after the Second Vatican Council, some seventy years after the novel was written, did the liturgy of the word receive new emphasis and appreciation.

In cutting short the ritual and sacramental aspects of liturgy and emphasizing the oral teachings of Peter (and occasionally Paul), Sienkiewicz portrays a Christianity that has less denominational “flavor” than that of other contemporary novels. The sermons do not focus on theological matters but on the life of Jesus as described in the gospels and on general rules for life. Peter begins his sermon “like a father admonishing his children and teaching them how to live” (*QV* 20, 165).

Sienkiewicz thus removes specifics. Similarly, he ignores conflicts. As far as we can tell from the *Acts of the Apostles* and the letters of Paul, one of the most significant problems discussed by the apostles is their attitude towards non-Jews who had joined the Christian community or were aspiring to membership. According to Paul’s letter to the Galatians (2:11–14) for example, Peter and some other Jewish Christians separated themselves temporarily from gentile members of the congregation in Antioch, refusing to eat with them for fear of violating Jewish religious law. Peter and Paul clashed openly over this matter, with Paul advocating full community between both groups.
This kind of conflict was seemingly widespread in the early Christian congregations: Peter, for example, was apparently influenced in his separatist approach by James (Gal. 2:11–12) and the matter was discussed during the council of the apostles in Jerusalem (48–9 CE).33 Asked whether full conversion to Judaism should be made mandatory for gentiles wishing to join the Christian community, the assembly decided to accept gentiles without full conversion and only a minimum of requirements.34 The decision – a milestone in the evolution of Christianity from a Jewish sect into a separate religion – was based on the grounds that gentiles had received the Holy Spirit together with Jews even before they had converted.

The explosiveness of the issue is palpable from the fact that the Christian elders demanded that Paul, together with four others, undergo ritual purification as prescribed by Jewish tradition to prove to everyone “that you are yourself a practicing Jew and observe the law.” Paul obeyed and underwent the ritual in Jerusalem (Acts 21:23–6). About the same time, a pragmatic solution evolved for the different priorities of Peter and Paul: Peter would focus on the Jewish members of the new community and Paul on the gentiles (Gal. 2:7).

It appears that the reconciliation of Jewish tradition with the presence of gentile members continued to be an issue for the congregation in Rome (and other cities) under the reign of Nero as well. Galatians and Romans, written around 48 to 58, discuss the topic extensively. Yet this thorny and highly controversial background is never mentioned in the novel or in the films, although Sienkiewicz was doubtlessly aware of it.35 Since the only direct reference to the relationship between gentile and Jewish Christians is Lygia’s rebuke of Vinicius’ contempt for Nazarius, the general impression is that their community life is unproblematic.

Equally invisible in the novel is the question of the place of women in the Church which was clearly an issue: Paul would not warn women to be silent if women were not speaking (I Cor. 14:33–9). Similarly, the disagreement between Paul and James over the necessity of works for salvation is attested but does not appear in the novel (Romans 3:28, James 5:14–15). Of course, one would hardly expect a romantic novel to introduce theological problems or organizational complexities; the novel’s emphasis on personal faith and the changes in behavior it brings about is only to be expected. Yet the result of these omissions is a depiction of an early Christianity that is both bland and implausibly homogenous – and so ideally suited for mass popularity and for film.
Thus, Paul’s letters figure several times in the novel but we do not get any idea about their content. While the letters that were accepted into the Christian canon are part of an internal theological debate, in the novel Paul’s messages serve to make him and the Christian faith famous to outsiders.\textsuperscript{36} Several times we hear that Acte has read the letters of Paul without being a Christian herself (\textit{QV} 4, 37). Similarly, the travels of Paul are mentioned several times in the book but are not placed in the larger context of organizing and extending the Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean. The allusions to his journeys are a nod to Christian scriptures and a convenient tool to connect to the predominantly Christian readership Sienkiewicz could expect for the first publication without carrying further relevance for the actual plot.

\textbf{Transmitting a Tradition: Sermons in Novel and Film}

The topics of the novel’s sermons include a short account of the crucifixion (sermon of Peter, \textit{QV} 25, 207–8), a longer one on the resurrection of Christ, the encounter with Thomas and the apparition on the shore of the Lake of Tiberias (told by Peter, \textit{QV} 20, 170–1), and general admonitions to avoid excesses, to be virtuous, and to love every human being (sermon of Peter, \textit{QV} 20, 165). None of these topics is enriched by extra-biblical legends that are part especially of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox heritage and were doubtlessly known to Sienkiewicz. Therefore, the sermons will sound familiar to every reader familiar with the gospels.

In the 1912 film, the content of Peter’s sermons is not given but they are said in an intertitle to have a deep impact on Vinicius. Thus, Peter becomes his main contact person among the Christian elders while in the novel it is Paul who teaches the young man in Antium. (All the films drop Paul’s extensive teaching of Vinicius and discussions with Petronius).

In the 1925 film, Peter gives a sermon during a gathering of Christians in the catacombs. The content of his speech is shown in the form of a flashback and is not from the novel: a woman hands Jesus on his way to his crucifixion a piece of cloth to wipe off his sweat. When he returns the cloth, it has the image of his face imprinted on it. The core of the legend is attested in both the Orthodox and the Catholic Church and centers around a venerated portrait of the suffering Christ, known as the \textit{vera icon} (“true image”). In the West, the name “\textit{vera icon}” led to the legend of a woman called “Veronica.”
The legend acquired a place in the liturgy when it was included in the “Stations of the Cross” present in Catholic Churches. Of all the characters in the Stations, only Veronica has no biblical background. This scene therefore links the apostle Peter closely to contemporary Catholic practices. Moreover, a statue of Veronica presenting the cloth is one of the four statues adorning the high altar in St. Peter’s basilica. The sweeping movement with which she shows the cloth is the same we see in the 1925 film and it is highly probable that a great number of Italian spectators (and others who had visited St. Peter’s basilica) realized the similarity. On the other hand, the woman’s kindness does not need the specific connection to a legend or contemporary liturgical practice to be understandable. The film is thus coded: the sermon conveys a distinctly Catholic message for Catholic audiences but avoids making it so obvious that other Christians will feel excluded.

The most non-denominational sermons, however, are found in the 1951 film where the topics stay close to the gospels, sometimes combining the accounts of several gospels into one sermon. The first sermon of Peter at the Ostrianum merges a part of the story about the appointment of the first disciples in Matthew (4:18–19: the apostles will become fishers of men) with the apparition of the risen Christ on the sea of Galilee in John (21:1–11: the apostles throw out their net at Jesus’ command after an unsuccessful night of work and catch an astonishing number of fish without damaging their net). The new combination of these particular scenes is probably not arbitrary. The 153 big fish caught by the disciples on the Sea of Galilee are traditionally interpreted to represent all the nations. The image belongs, therefore, to the same category as the metaphor of the “fishers of men” in Matthew and is meant to stress the role and task of Peter.

The sermon is punctuated by images: the Last Supper is based on Leonardo, the scene at the Sea of Galilee seems loosely based on Tintoretto, and the appearance to the disciples is also in the style of a mannerist painting, though it does not seem to have a particular painting as its source. These images are coded. For Catholics, such images are an aid in prayer, and the sermon, although it takes place in a cave, evokes a church. For Protestants, the powerful images still imply that Peter successfully transmits his own vivid memories to the crowd while authorizing the film’s audience to use the tradition of religious art as a reliable guide. Especially because the Last Supper is so familiar, the painterly images can serve as reminders of the illustrations in a children’s Bible. The images, like the text of the sermon, deny denominational differences in interpretation: the point lies in emotional access to the story which the images provide.
The 1985 miniseries, too, shows Peter and Paul teaching but their lessons are sessions of questions and answers rather than traditional sermons. Most of them do not take place in a liturgical context but at informal gatherings of Christians outside the city walls. The audience asks questions of personal interest (they want to know what Jesus’ voice was like, or if the rumors that Peter denied Jesus are true) and they receive personalized answers. Peter talks about his personal experiences with Jesus, avoiding giving general rules for behavior to the audience. The only time that he talks about remotely theological issues, he does so in response to a frightening sermon from Crispus by reassuring the audience that they will find mercy before God. His speech is accompanied by the announcement that Mark’s gospel is completed and will be copied under the supervision of the apostles. This practical piece of information helps to give the sermon a more casual style than the formal sermons of other versions.

In the 1985 series, Paul too answers personal questions in an informal gathering. Lygia asks about her love for Vinicius in such a group while in the novel and the earlier films only Lygia, Peter, Paul, and Crispus were present. The dialogical way of teaching corresponds to a modern understanding of authority, which allows the leading figure to be questioned and even expects active participation from “students.” Christianity in this version is based on community.

The Representation of the Scriptures

The novel and all the films contain allusions both to the gospels and to the Hebrew Scriptures. Characters quote from them, for example, when Lygia admonishes Ursus that “thou shalt not kill,” or when Glaucus tells Chilo that Jesus had said, “If thy brother has sinned against thee, chastise him; but if he is repentant, forgive him.” Occasionally, the novel uses quotations from biblical texts in the mouth of Nero and his courtiers, where they assume a sinister ring. When Nero, anxious about the rioting people who have lost their homes in the burning of Rome, looks for a scapegoat, he finally turns to Tigellinus and accuses him of starting the blaze. Tigellinus does not deny it but insists that he acted on Nero’s orders. After a threatening silence, Nero murmurs:
“Tigellinus [. . .] do you love me?”
“You know I do, my lord.”
“Then why don’t you sacrifice yourself for me?”
Tigellinus wore a bitter smile. “Why do you hand me such a sweet cup to drink, my lord,” he asked coldly, “when you know I don’t dare touch it?”

(QV 48, 370–1)

The beginning of the dialogue resembles the triple question of the risen Christ to Peter: “Simon Bar Jona, do you love me?” and the triple answer of the disciple: “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” (John 21:15–17). By alluding to this particular part of the gospels, Sienkiewicz brings to mind a scene that is important as a background for the non-canonical Quo Vadis story that follows a few scenes later. The triple answers of Peter and the order to “feed my sheep” re-establish the relationship severed by Peter’s triple denial of Jesus. In the Quo Vadis scene, Christ’s remark that Peter was “leaving my people” is alluding precisely to this scene and to the command given to Peter, and Peter’s decision to go back shows that he has learned his lesson.

When Tigellinus refuses to run any risk for the emperor, he does this in words that evoke the moment at Gethsemane in which Jesus, terrified by his imminent death, asks God to “take this cup” from him (Luke 22:42). But while Jesus gives in to God’s will, Tigellinus not only refuses to endanger his life but questions Nero’s right to bring up the idea at all, and finally threatens to call upon the praetorians if the emperor should insist. Although the wording, in the latter case, does not closely resemble any biblical verse, the same idea of averting a threat by force is brought up by Peter who strikes at the servant of the High Priest in the garden of Gethsemane and is rebuked by Jesus.

By alluding to the gospels in this way and actually putting Jesus’ and Peter’s words into Nero’s and Tigellinus’ mouth, Sienkiewicz creates an awkward anti-picture of the biblical narrative, in which both the emperor and his chief courtier represent values and attitudes that are opposed to the message of the gospels.

As a written tradition, however, the gospels occur only in the 1985 miniseries, in which literature generally plays an important role. Early on, “the writings of the followers of Moses” are mentioned, which Seneca had given Petronius to read. Petronius’ own literary activities are an ongoing topic throughout the series.
Among Christian writings, the focus of attention is the gospel of Mark. The successful accomplishment of the work is solemnly announced by Peter and Paul to a jubilant congregation. After praising Mark for his work, the apostles decide that the literate among the faithful should produce as many copies as possible so that everyone in the world might be able to read it. While the gospel is, in this scene, explicitly authorized by eyewitnesses such as Peter and therefore intimately linked to oral tradition, it is also imagined as readily understandable by future readers even without the direct account of Jesus’ contemporaries which it is meant to replace once all eyewitnesses have died.

Although the gospel of Mark plays a prominent role in the series, it is not the only source of information about Jesus’ life. When Lygia chooses the birth of Jesus for her mosaic, she cannot rely on Mark (who does not have the story) but takes inspiration from the version of Luke, the only gospel that presents the nativity scene, and in part from Matthew, the only gospel in which the star of Bethlehem is mentioned. Both are still unwritten or incomplete at the time of the plot: at the beginning of the 1985 series, Peter, Mark and an anonymous Christian, who secretly collects scrolls containing “eyewitnesses’ accounts and memories” of those who had met Jesus, come together and the anonymous man tells Peter that Matthew “also had written something, but it is still incomplete, relying on memory.” Peter answers that “Matthew has a good memory. A tax collector’s memory,” thereby confirming that the Matthew they speak about is indeed the evangelist (who according to tradition is Matthew the tax collector mentioned in the gospels).

Looking back from its modern perspective, the audience realizes that the (at the time still oral) tradition that inspires Lygia’s mosaic is later to become a part of the canonical gospels and is, therefore, to be considered as authoritative as the gospel of Mark.

The reliability of the Christian transmission of Jesus’ deeds, although not codified at the time of the plot, is highlighted at the very beginning of the series, when Christians gather scrolls containing Jesus’ words and then compare them to what Peter and Mark remember about a specific detail. Among these scrolls, some of which contain Peter’s memories, there is also a work by a man named Thomas who had sent it to Rome asking Peter to check it and encouraging Mark to write down what he remembers. It is not entirely clear who the man is but since he is only identified by his name and speaks with some authority, which Mark and
Peter willingly accept, it is likely that he is the apostle Thomas. In this case, the fact that he has his works checked by Peter suggests that Peter has authority over other apostles, confirming his special role which is the basis for the special role of the popes as his successors.

The authoritative version of the gospel, however, is, in the 1985 series, not established through textual criticism of any kind but by the converging memories of Jesus’ disciples: The anonymous Christian starts to read out a passage from Matthew (28:19f): “Go therefore and teach ye all nations . . .” which is then taken up by Peter, who, apparently concentrating hard, recalls Jesus’ words “. . . baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you . . .” which is then completed by Mark, who adds, from his memory: “. . . and behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world.” It is striking that this passage is the end of the gospel of Matthew as we have it, although the speaker had just told Peter that Matthew’s account was not yet complete. The writing of the gospel is here seemingly imagined not as a continuous work from beginning to end, but as a gradual process, in which the author completes single pieces and later, after having them diligently checked, puts them together to form the gospel as we know it.

In the end, the converging testimony of three eyewitnesses leads to an authoritative version that is identical to the text still found in the gospel familiar to the modern audience. The representation also implies that Mark in fact knew from his own memories at least some of the details that are today found only in Matthew. The viewer of the 1985 series is surely not expected to consider the differences among the gospels (and to imagine that Mark for some reason omitted those details found only in Matthew); rather the 1985 series merges the separate gospels together as a single authoritative source. The value of Peter’s eyewitness report is stressed by the fact that he is obviously illiterate (when the anonymous Christian hands him the scroll, he gives it back to him asking “what does this say?”), so that his memories are independent of the emerging written tradition. The fact that they are identical to Matthew’s text shows that he is reliable, despite his old age and the more than three decades that have passed since the events.

The convergence of the accounts is, according to the 1985 series, the basis for the development of a common cultural heritage, laid down in the gospels, for those Christians who do not know Jesus from
first-person-encounters. Although these later generations gather their knowledge from a common source rather than from individual experiences, the mutual agreement among the eyewitnesses ensures that the codified form of the gospels still reflects the individual experiences of the disciples. Identifying with the characters in the gospels and internalizing their experiences will therefore, in this view, allow the reader to establish a personalized encounter with Jesus.  

Radicals: Crispus

Crispus has his major scenes in the novel when he reproaches Lygia for her “sinful” love for Vinicius (QV 27, 226–7) and preaches during the fire about God’s wrath and the impending doom of Rome. Some of the imagery he uses comes from Jesus’ sermon about the end of days and from the Book of Revelation (written around 90 CE). But while modern biblical scholarship agrees that the partly arcane metaphors of the book were intended as a consolation to the Christian communities persecuted under Domitian, Crispus’ gloomy prophesies do not spread hope but rather fear and hatred (QV 45, 349–50). They are interrupted by Peter who, taking up the imagery of revelation but stressing the consolatory aspects, succeeds in calming the panicking audience. As soon as the people see him, “terror passed at once, as it passes from a flock in which the shepherd has appeared” (QV 45, 350). The metaphor used by Sienkiewicz, as so often, picks up the language of the gospels, where Peter is ordered to be a shepherd to the Christian community. At the same time, the metaphor stresses the charisma of the apostle who undoes the effects of Crispus’ preaching immediately.

Crispus, however, is only temporarily silenced. The other martyrs in the novel die without displaying hatred or anger. But in the eyes of the crucified Crispus (who wears a rose garland on his head) “gleamed always that same exhaustless energy; that same fanatical stern face gazed from beneath the crown of roses” (QV 57, 454–5). When he starts to warn the martyrs about to die with him that even they should tremble before God’s anger, this time it is Paul who criticizes him from the stands, reminding him “that Christ’s command to love men was higher than that to hate evil, for His religion is not hatred, but love” (QV 57, 455–6). Although he accepts Paul’s criticism, Crispus’ face “assumed an expression so pitiless, and his eyes flashed with such fire, that the Augustians whispered to one another,” as he curses Nero,
The character of Crispus is, in the novel, modeled on a type of puritanical ascetic who, although with good intentions, is too rigorous and zealous. While both Peter and Paul put love and compassion for the individual over everything else, Crispus adheres to rigid principles he applies regardless of his counterpart’s situation.

At the same time, his apocalyptic views might echo some of the mystic and apocalyptic speculations of the Polish philosopher A. Towiarzki, who influenced the poet Mickiewicz in developing a kind of revolutionary eschatology, including the identification of Poland as the “Christ of Nations.” This movement, which became popular in nineteenth-century Poland, pursued a political strategy very different from the positivists to whom Sienkiewicz felt close.

The two silent films do not develop the character of Crispus. The 1912 film reduces his role to the scene in which he reproaches Lygia for her love for Vinicius. The girl has come to ask for advice because she is confused about whether she is allowed to love “a patrician.” The film does not give the wording of Crispus’ reproach, but while he is still talking to Lygia, Peter and Paul enter the scene. From Peter’s rebuke to Crispus, we can assume that Crispus, just as in the novel, has denounced her love as a sin. Peter reminds Crispus that “Even I have thrice renounced Christ, yet he has forgiven me.” Turning to Lygia, he adds: “Your love is without sin.” In the background, Paul is seen talking seriously to Crispus but we do not get the wording of this conversation either. The scene then switches to the house of Vinicius. The main function of Crispus is therefore to trigger Peter’s remarks that cause Lygia to hold on to her love for Vinicius.

However, Peter’s comments as given in the film are in themselves inconsistent, suggesting on the one hand that Lygia’s conduct is bad but forgivable (just as his denial of Christ was), while on the other hand reassuring the girl that her love is without sin. The inconsistency is caused by a compression of his remarks in the novel which are in themselves not entirely clear. In the book, Peter first reminds Crispus how Jesus, by attending the wedding at Cana, had “blessed love between man and woman” (QV 27, 227). He then adduces two women whom Jesus forgave (Mary Magdalene, and “the public sinner”) and concludes with the rhetorical question of whether Jesus under these circumstances “would turn from this maiden who is as pure as a lily of the field” (QV 26, 227–8). The assertion that Lygia is “pure as a lily” excludes any comparison between her and the sinners in the gospels. When Crispus explains that he had “thought that by admitting to her heart an earthly love she had denied Christ,” Peter mentions his own
denial of Jesus (and Paul joins in by confessing his own implication in the persecution of the new faith and in the killing of Stephen). So even if Crispus wrongly assumed that Lygia was denying Christ, he should have been willing to forgive her as Christ had forgiven both Paul and Peter for more serious offenses. The underlying logic works but the transition between the claim that Lygia has done nothing wrong and the argument that Crispus should have been more forgiving is murky. The episode is trying simultaneously to claim that erotic love can be entirely Christian and to stress that true Christianity is forgiving.

The 1912 version, while following the novel, makes the confusion more severe by abbreviating the scene. Having Peter immediately adduce his denial of Christ strengthens the initial impression that there is something seriously wrong about Lygia’s feelings. Substituting Peter’s own experience for that of the two sinful women, on the other hand, increases the drama of the situation (Peter speaks from his own experience), while the film leaves open whether the sin Crispus saw in Lygia was sexual love itself, loving a non-Christian, or loving a patrician.

In the 1925 version, Crispus does not appear at all. Instead, Lygia hands a cross to Vinicius and Peter advises her, “Lead him gently, for the Master said: there is rejoicing in heaven over a sinner who repenteth.” His words are followed by a close-up of Vinicius with the cross. Peter, then, has no doubts about Lygia. Instead of warning her to avoid him until he is converted, Peter relies on Lygia to accomplish Vinicius’ conversion. Lacking Crispus, this version acknowledges no division within Christianity at all.

Like the 1925 film, the 1951 version drops Crispus from the story. The scene that shows Lygia’s doubts about her love is an open quarrel with Vinicius in the presence of Paul. Vinicius refuses to share Lygia’s love with Christ and Paul explains to him that “your love for Lygia, great and beautiful as you feel it, is small compared with your love for all mankind.” Lygia rejects Marcus’ pleas to come with him and, after Marcus leaves, in his anger breaking a cross Lygia had put on the wall, Paul comforts her, saying that “even our Lord knew temptation. Your strength too will prevail and be rewarded in this. I know that.” The change is revealing in that Paul here may be taking a similar stance to Crispus, although he does not use the same graphic words. Her desire to go with Marcus is a temptation comparable to the temptation of Jesus in the desert and Paul is confident that the girl will resist it just as Jesus resisted the devil. It is not entirely clear whether Paul here sees sexual love as itself the temptation, or whether
the temptation would be to marry Vinicius when he does not understand Christianity, let alone accept its claims.

Paul's earlier relationship to Lygia in the 1951 film resembles that between Crispus and Lygia in the novel. Crispus had been her first teacher. Similarly, Paul is introduced at the beginning of the film as a rabbi (glossed as “teacher”) with a familiar relationship to the girl. The historical Paul, of course, notoriously describes marriage only as the acceptable second-best for those who cannot remain celibate (1 Cor. 7: 7–9), presumably because he thought the Second Coming was near. Yet the romantic plot of the film demands that the audience approve of the marriage of Marcus and Lygia once he becomes a Christian, and Paul says nothing explicitly against sexual love or marriage as such. Since most Christian denominations do not encourage celibacy, and those who do (the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches) still consider marriage a sacrament, Paul's words are framed very carefully. Those who know his attitude on marriage might interpret the “temptation” as a general discouragement while others can see it as advice to stay away from Vinicius while he is still a pagan.

The 1951 film removes any hint of apocalyptic thinking. During the great fire, for example, the film focuses entirely on Marcus' courageous behavior, while nobody in the panicking crowd around him makes any attempt to evaluate the catastrophe or interpret it as a sign of doomsday, as Crispus does in the novel. An eschatological frenzy would seem preposterous for the moviegoer of the year 1951. At the same time, leaving these passages out corresponds to the film’s tendency to avoid open theological statements about Jesus while idealizing early Christianity even more than the novel does. The initial voice-over describes the crucifixion as “a miracle,” but then refers to it in a way that could even be understood in a secular way (“a man died to make men free”). This tendency corresponds to the ideal of American civic religion, in which religious statements are framed in a general way that does not exclude any faith community, and it is typical of the Christian–Roman film.43

When a woman calls Nero a “beast” during Marcus’ triumph, the apostle Peter, who happens to be standing nearby, gently corrects her: “No man is a beast. Look at him and know that he is but sick. Sick in heart and spirit, in his soul.” The intervention of the apostle is not found in the novel. However, the term “beast” is borrowed from it: Peter himself, in prayer, calls Rome “the den of the ‘Beast,’” and the Christians, as they entreat Peter to flee, speak of his death as a potential triumph for the “Beast” (QV 68, 512). Here, of course, the beast is the beast of Rev. 13, identified
with the Antichrist. (In the novel, Nero is also called the Antichrist on the same page.) In the 1951 film, the opening voice-over has spoken of “the Antichrist known to history as the emperor Nero.” Yet the film obviously uses the word only metaphorically—there is no suggestion that Nero’s reign is a prefiguration of the Apocalypse. Indeed, “known to history” takes real force from the expression. The triumph scene transforms the Beast into a beast. The apocalyptic word is first emptied of apocalyptic content and then the authoritative voice of Peter denies that it is appropriate. Peter’s words convey the Christian message that no one is beyond redemption. The statement that Nero is “sick,” however, blends traditional Christian language with the therapeutic attitudes of the American liberal: Nero is mentally ill, and the comments echo attempts to psychoanalyze Hitler. The film gives a less familiar Christianity no voice.

Eliminating Crispus also removes the only source of disagreement in the novel’s representation of Christianity. Vinicius clearly perceives Peter and Paul as representatives of the same worldview (he talks about Paul “and his fanatical fisherman”) and Peter is later planning to leave for Greece where he hopes to meet with Paul.

The 1985 miniseries, on the other hand, extends Crispus’ role as a preacher and leader of the community, while eliminating his relationship to Lygia. Whereas in the novel he is described as “an old man” and “the old presbyter, who from the moment of her flight from the Palatine had been to her as a father,” the Crispus of the 1985 series is young (Tigellinus explicitly calls him “young man” during the interrogation), and almost of the same age as Lygia, so that he cannot assume the same paternal position.

He is first seen delivering a “fire and brimstone” sermon during a Christian service and is criticized by Peter for it. In contrast to the book, where he uses apocalyptic language only when interpreting the catastrophic fire, this sermon takes place well before the great blaze. On a dramatic level, it serves to give credibility to later accusations that the Christians had started the fire hoping to bring the end of the world about. During the blaze, Crispus’ voice is heard urging the Christians: “put a mark on your door-posts, painted in the color of your blood. Guide the Lord to your dwellings. The Lord shall save us from the flames that devour this city of sins.” The reference to the exodus from Egypt (for which the Israelites prepared by marking their doorposts with the blood of the Paschal lamb so their first-borns would not be killed in the last plague, Ex. 12.7) is not found in the novel. It underlines, on the one hand, the continuity between Christianity
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and Judaism, which is also stressed elsewhere in the series (it is in this same scene that Christians look like Jews at the Western Wall). But its primary purpose is to prove Crispus wrong. The spectators know that the fire does not bypass these marked houses and, unlike the Israelites, who left Egypt unharmed, a great number of Christians were killed in the persecution that followed the blaze. The same effect is dominant in Crispus' address to a group of Christians praying desperately in the burning city. “Purifying flames,” he tells them, “announce the coming of the judge. […] Rome shall burn, and the earth will open up, and give out the dead and Christ will appear on a cloud […] Prostrate yourselves and wail for mercy, because your time is near.” Booming organ sounds underline his words. It is obvious, of course, to the modern spectator that the burning of Rome did not bring the end of the world and that Crispus’ worldview is therefore misguided. But his speech also contradicts the comforting message of Jesus’ speech about the end of times (Luke 21:27–8) from which it borrows its metaphors. In these scenes, he resembles the missionaries who are so familiar to everyone in North America and Europe that the bearded man carrying a sign proclaiming the imminent end of the world is a stock character of the cartoon.

While Crispus’ worldview is simplifying and imperfect, he nevertheless possesses an impressive strength of character that becomes apparent during the persecution. When Tigellinus interrogates him, trying to get him to collaborate and testify against fellow Christians, he refuses and is visibly shaken when a Christian father desecrates the cross to save his family. A voice-over, apparently representing Crispus’ thoughts, gives passages from the gospels encouraging the reader to remain steadfast during times of persecution (Mt. 24:13; Mark 13:9; Luke 21:12). These quotations are given accurately, emphasizing that Crispus, for all his zeal during the fire, is in fact an adherent of mainstream Christianity: one of the quotations comes from the gospel of Mark whose completion the Christians celebrated shortly before. Finally, Crispus is burned in the gardens of Nero along with other victims, exhorting them to “weep for our sins, brothers, because death will not wash them away unless we pray first.” He then leads the condemned in saying the Lord’s Prayer. This attitude is quite different from his behavior in the novel. In the 1985 series, however, neither Paul nor Peter is at hand to console the victims: Crispus is the only one to stay with them until the very end and he fulfills this task in a way that seems to help the martyrs. Although Nero is present at the execution, this Crispus dies quietly, without cursing Nero as he had in the novel. His stern attitudes are thus
matched by outstanding courage and commitment to his role as a leader of the Christian community.

The 2001 Polish version, which is generally close to the novel, shows Crispus first scolding Lygia for her love to Vinicius. His speech remains close to that in the novel: he calls the young man “Antichrist’s serf and ally,” warns Lygia that he only wants her for a concubine, and advises her to “flee before the evil spirit makes you fall.” Peter and Paul then join the two, and both argue along the same lines as in the novel, causing Crispus to acknowledge his wrong attitude towards Lygia. Later, Crispus dies crucified in the arena, cursing Nero just as he had in the novel. However, he does not warn his fellow martyrs of God’s wrath and his death is accompanied by solemn chords of a string orchestra that could come from a Bach cantata. He is thus marked as an accepted member of the Christian community, even though in his life he has voiced more radical views than the others.

Mainstream Christianity: Peter and Paul

Peter and Paul represent what is to become the mainstream of Christianity. In the novel, Peter enjoys the highest prestige in the community. His arrival in Rome is announced with great joy and he is described preaching, baptizing, and comforting people. His reputation is based on his personal acquaintance with Jesus and his testimony is considered so important that he alone is urged by the congregation to flee from the Neronian persecution. Reluctantly, the Apostle agrees but, upon leaving Rome on the Appian Way, an apparition of Christ prompts him to return to the city. Shortly afterwards, he is arrested and crucified upside down on the Vatican hill, while Paul, at about the same time, is decapitated at Aquae Salviae near the Ostian way. The Quo Vadis legend and the story of Peter’s being crucified upside down are found in the apocryphal Acts of Peter and alluded to in other early Christian texts. Paul’s death is mentioned in the apocryphal first letter of Clemens to the Corinthians. The locations given by Sienkiewicz for their executions likewise follow early Christian traditions. They correspond to the sites of St. Peter’s basilica on the Vatican hill and of the basilica of S. Paolo fuori le Mura, erected over the presumed burial places of the apostles.
Personal qualities and experiences are more important in the novel’s description of Peter and Paul than theological issues. Most of these details come from biblical sources. The reader learns that Paul is a Jew from Tarsus with Roman citizenship, and Paul himself reminds Crispus that he had persecuted the first Christians and was involved in the stoning of Stephen. There is also a brief allusion to his travels and to the fact that he first came to Rome as a prisoner but the background of his captivity and the reasons for his release remain largely mysterious, with only a vague allusion that Paul had been arrested “because of charges preferred by the Jews.”

From the *Acts of the Apostles* we know that Paul, using his right as a Roman citizen, appealed to the emperor when his appearance sparked riots in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27–34 and 25:10–12). Since Paul is a free man at the time of the novel’s plot, he must somehow have appeared before Nero and thus be known to at least some members of the court. But this relationship, too, is mainly left in the dark. Petronius knows Paul but it is not clear if he met him through Vinicius or if he had been in contact with him before. These uncertainties are presumably due to the fact that we know nothing precise about Paul’s trial in Rome (evidence from the scriptures suggests that he made some travels after his imprisonment which would mean that he was at least temporarily released). Since he had no sound sources, Sienkiewicz apparently preferred to leave the matter in the dark.51

Paul’s most outstanding personal features in the novel are his learning and his intellectual skills. He accompanies Marcus Vinicius to Antium where he teaches him, and he makes an impression on the young man because “as a Jew, he knows the old Hebrew writings” (*QV* 28, 232). Petronius calls him eloquent and admits that Roman philosophers would have a hard time defeating Paul.

On the other hand, the novel does not mention Paul’s trade as a tent maker while it stresses Peter’s occupation as “the fisherman.” The idea of the pope as a fisherman is very prominent in papal ceremony (one symbol of his authority is the “fisherman’s ring” which the faithful kiss and which serves as the pope’s individual seal). The tent maker, on the other hand, is not charged with equal symbolic value in the Catholic Church. At the same time, the lack of any practical professional background in the novel helps to portray Paul as an intellectual.

In most films, Paul’s learning, which sets him apart from Peter, is less visible than it is in the novel. The 1912 version does not distinguish sharply between him and Peter. Both are seen baptizing and comforting people and
it is not clear if and what different characteristics or opinions they might have. In the 1925 film, Paul is completely absent. His two major scenes, the discussion with Crispus about Lygia’s love and the baptism of Chilo, are altered in such a way that his presence is not necessary. Peter comforts Lygia successfully without the support from a fellow apostle, and the Chilo of the 1925 film does not ask for baptism. This arrangement – which might simply serve to make the narrative tighter – strengthens the role of Peter but it also weakens the representation of the Christian community which loses, in the film, one of its most prominent representatives.

Compared to the silent films, in the 1951 film Paul is remarkably prominent, the first cinematic version to give him a profile of his own. He is presented as a “rabbi” and Lygia’s “teacher” of philosophy to Marcus Vini- cius, but it is obvious that the term “philosophy” serves only to hide the fact that he is a teacher of the Christian faith. In the same scene, he suggests to Lygia that if Marcus and his officer could be converted to Christianity, Rome as a whole might finally accept the new faith. He thus encourages Lygia to try and win her lover for Christianity and at the same time sets a broader vision that aims, ultimately, at a transformation of Roman society as a whole. The new interest in Paul is probably due to his strong identifi- cation with Judaism and it is therefore not surprising that the 1985 minise- ries, which associates the persecuted Christians with Jews in the modern era, picks up the idea.

In the 1985 version, Paul engages in a discussion with Petronius about the slaves of Pedanius Secundus and it is obvious that the sophisticated Roman considers Paul his equal and enjoys the intellectual exchange with him. Nevertheless, Paul has also practical skills, for when Petronius, after haggling with him about the fate of the condemned slaves, teasingly sug- gests that he should sell oriental carpets, Paul answers with a smile that he had done that in the past. The allusion is probably derived from his occupa- tion as a tent maker, but the association with the Orient also brings to mind the exotic background he shares with most of the other Christians. In fact, Paul wears in this scene a kind of orientalized hair style, setting him apart from ordinary Romans.

Peter, on the other hand, is not orientalized in any version. While inves- tigating Lygia’s whereabouts, Chilo hears him being described as the “supreme priest of the whole sect, who had been Christ’s disciple, and to whom Christ had confided government over the whole world of Christians” (QV 16, 139). Even Paul, himself a highly esteemed leader, acknowledges him as his superior (“Peter, my superior, has summoned me,”
he declares when entering the discussion with Lygia and Crispus, QV 27, 228). This attitude is not found in the text of the New Testament, where Paul on the one hand accepts the authority of Peter and the other apostles (Gal. 2:1–10) but is not afraid to rebuke Peter when he considers his behavior unacceptable (Gal. 2:11). There is no biblical evidence that Paul was ever “summoned” by Peter or that he called him his superior. Rather, the sentence reflects Sienkiewicz’s interpretation of Peter’s role as the first pope, laying the foundation for the authority later popes would exact over bishops. The films show Peter as the more important figure, while avoiding the issue of hierarchy (see Plate 6.2, from the 1951 film, where Paul introduces and then stands below Peter).

In the novel, Paul’s blessing of the martyrs in the arena and Peter’s blessing of the “city and the world” shortly before his death (QV 70, 520) are among Sienkiewicz’s relatively few anachronisms. In both cases, they make the sign of the cross in the air, although the oldest gesture of blessing is
either that of holding out both hands over the person (or object) or to lay both hands on his or her head. (The Polish film has Peter bless the dying Crispus with both hands spread out.) The earliest sources for a blessing in the form of the cross date back to the second century CE (e.g., Tertullian, de corona 3.4) but refer to individuals crossing themselves. Peter’s blessing of Rome and the world in the novel, accompanied by the words “urbi et orbi” (given in Latin) is clearly intended to recall the papal blessing “urbi et orbi.” This ceremony, however, was included in official papal ritual only in the thirteenth century. It is given at Easter, Christmas, and immediately after a pope’s election, which is probably the decisive point here (in dying, Peter begins his “reign”). It is significant, though, that in Sienkiewicz’s time, with the popes considering themselves “prisoners” of the liberal state, the blessings were not given from the loggia facing the city but instead inside the basilica, from where “the city and the world” could not be seen. The first to revive the tradition of giving the blessing facing the city was Pius XI in 1922. His move was loaded with political significance. The way Peter and Paul are described corresponds, therefore, to a Catholic view of history.

In the 1912 film, Peter carries a staff which serves, apparently, not as a means of support but as a sign of leadership, much like the staff of a bishop, and he blesses the crowd at the end of a Christian gathering by making the sign of the cross in the air with his right hand while holding the staff in his left, much as a bishop would. The position of his fingers (repeated in the baptism scene) with only the index and the middle finger raised resembles a gesture of blessing known from sacral art. The 1951 film has Peter make the sign of the cross in the air before his sermon to the assembly of Christians. It is, however, handled with predictable care. Peter, who holds a crook in his left hand, makes a downward stroke with his right. The camera then cuts to the crowd. When it returns to Peter, he is just finishing the gesture and beginning to speak. Catholics, to whom this gesture is so familiar, will recognize it without difficulty. Others might not.

The question of such anachronistic allusions is particularly salient in the case of Peter because he – and the Bishop of Rome as his successor – is regarded as the legitimate vicarius Christi, the representative of Christ on Earth, by the Roman Catholic Church. Historically, this claim often involved political as well as theological aspirations. While Catholics justified the supremacy of Rome (and its bishop) by pointing to the martyrdom and the graves of the apostles Peter and Paul in the city, some Protestant theologians argued that the tradition was false.
The novel already hints at the theme of papal authority in its description of the martyrdom of the apostles. On the way to their execution, both Peter and Paul are described in royal terms. Peter looks back at Rome: “as a ruler and king looks at his inheritance. And he said to it, ‘Thou art redeemed and mine.’ And no one . . . could divine that standing there among them was the true ruler of that moving life . . . that old man would be lord there unbrokenly” (QV 70, 405).

Paul “went to his reward like a conqueror” (QV 70, 521). The attributes of royalty emphasize the contrast with Nero and fit into a tradition which acclaims Peter and Paul as the principes apostolorum (“princes of the apostles”) and describes and depicts them with royal attributes. Yet they also suggest the vanished secular power of the Church. Paul’s royal aspect might to some extent diminish the political implications of this treatment of Peter but the novel has explicitly made him lesser than Peter. So this hint at the pope’s right to rule Rome may help explain why none of the films includes the martyrdom of Paul and the only one to show Peter’s, the 1951, does not include such a moment.

The novel openly addresses the relationship between Peter and the papacy only at the very end:

So ended Nero, passing like a windstorm, a typhoon, a fire, a war and a plague. But Peter’s church stands on the heights of the Vatican to this day, and it commands the city and the world. And near the old gate of Porta Capena stands a little chapel with a small tablet sunk into the wall. The writing is somewhat faint with age. It asks: “Quo Vadis, Domine?” (QV Epilogue, 541)

Neither the 1912 nor the 1925 Italian production reproduces this statement closely. Towards the end of the 1912 version, an intertitle announces the revolt of Galba, motivating the suicide of Nero which occurs shortly after. His death is then commented on in the two final intertitles: “So Nero died consumed as if by fire. There was mourning and the sadness of death.” – “But out of the tears and the blood came a new life: Christianity, symbol of love & peace.” The film then closes with a view of Christ in front of a shiny white cross, embracing his followers who gather at his feet. The first intertitle is visibly inspired by the novel in combining Nero’s death with the metaphor of fire which suggests the total obliteration of the evil emperor. But while the book concludes with a direct reference to Peter’s church which “stands on the heights of the Vatican to this day,” the 1912 film is less specific: it is not explicitly the Roman church that arises out of the
mourning, the sadness, the tears and the blood, but Christianity in general. In the 1925 version, the wording of the final intertitle is equally unspecific: “So Nero passed – as a whirlwind, as a storm, as fire, as war or death passes – but the cross endures.” The final tableau shows Peter conducting the marriage of Marcus and Lygia; his martyrdom is completely removed. The Quo Vadis scene no longer makes any sense since Peter survives the Neronian persecution.

Since the 1912 version was entirely, and the 1925 partly, produced by Italians and both films aimed at an Italian audience, it is unlikely that theological debates influenced how they concluded. Church-state relations did. There was serious tension between the Vatican and the fledgling Italian state throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century. In 1867, six years after Italian unification, the state began to secularize most church property. In 1870, government troops occupied Rome. The pope retreated to the Vatican where he proclaimed himself a “prisoner.” The Vatican did not acknowledge the new Italian state and, in the following years, repeated announcements instructed Catholics to resist the secular government. During World War I, tensions arose over the question of German and Austrian diplomats accredited at the Vatican and the Vatican’s contact with its own ambassadors in enemy countries. The Lateran treaties only settled this tension in 1929, five years after the D’Annunzio Quo Vadis came out, with mutual recognition between the Vatican and the Republic of Italy. So in either 1912 or 1925, the novel’s claim that the “Vatican ruled the world” would have been in opposition to the very foundations of the Italian state.

The 1925 film was a German–Italian co-production and such a claim would not have received the favor of large parts of the German audience either. In Germany, tensions between national state and Catholic Church reached a peak after the unification of the country in 1871. As in Italy, the conflict between church doctrine and liberalism added to the conflict. Chancellor Bismarck proclaimed a “Kulturkampf” which included anti-Catholic legislation and was “intended to complete the moral, social and cultural unification of Germany.” Although the campaign that had led to the arrest or exile of bishops, priests, and lay activists had ended in 1887, the relationship between the denominations was still tense by the mid-twenties. A common accusation put forward against Catholics was ultramontanism – an extreme loyalty to the pope that rendered their loyalty to the German state doubtful. With such sensitivities in both countries, there could be no advantage in reproducing Sienkiewicz’s epilogue on the screen. The conclusion of the 1925 film avoids specifically Catholic claims.
At the same time, it is striking that near the beginning of the 1925 film, before anyone needs a scapegoat, an edict is issued making it a capital crime to be a Christian.\textsuperscript{62} From the start, the Christians are not just anxious, but persecuted. They gather in catacombs. Peter consoles them by reminding them that Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” It is an odd choice of verse; in this context, it seems to mean that, although the evil rule here, the good will be rewarded in the other world. But it also seems to have a sharp ideological point. In this film, Christianity is victimized by power from the start, as the contemporary church regarded itself as oppressed by the state. However, the film conveys its message in support of the church while insisting that the Church does not seek to interfere with the state’s prerogatives.

Both silent films also drop the moment in the novel in which Peter, having returned to Rome after his vision, blesses the martyrs in the arena and thus appears as a leader of the community (\textit{QV} 55, 436). In contrast, in the 1951 version, instead of giving his blessing silently, Peter attracts the attention of the spectators and of Nero as he rises from his seat and speaks with a booming voice to the crowd, using the later, distinctly western, blessing with his full hand (it is one of the most “Catholic” moments in the film). In the novel, an unidentified voice loudly cries “Peace to the martyrs” at the moment of Chilo’s death (\textit{QV} 62, 485) and the 1951 film seems to combine this moment with Peter’s blessing. His appearance prompts his arrest and finally his death sentence and crucifixion.

The 1951 version puts more emphasis on Peter in its final scene. It is the only film showing, although briefly, the execution of the apostle in Rome. While Sienkiewicz had described only Peter’s way to the place of his crucifixion, but not his trial or his death, the film includes first the reading of the verdict (“death by crucifixion”) followed by a short conversation between the apostle and the executioner (Peter remarking that it was too much of an honor to die as Jesus did, and the soldier promising sinisterly that “we can change that”). The next shot shows the foot of the cross, apparently complying with a tradition of earlier toga films that would often limit themselves to showing the feet of the crucified.\textsuperscript{63} With this tradition in mind, it comes as a shock when the camera, moving slowly upwards from the ground, reveals not the feet, but the head of Peter who has been crucified upside down. This detail is not found in the novel (where the narrative breaks off before the execution) but in the apocryphal \textit{Acts of Peter}. In the \textit{Acts}, it is the apostle himself who requests the unusual posture in order not to emulate Jesus’ death, while the film makes the method of
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execution a cruel move by the Roman soldier. In showing the crucifixion, the 1951 comes closer to the novel and to Christian tradition than all other film versions. Yet it is careful not to include anything that might recall the royal attributes of Peter in the novel and his links to the future papacy. While Peter is, in the novel, surrounded by a crowd of pagan and Christian people who unknowingly form his court, the film shows him abandoned on a cross in a darkening landscape that, like the images in his sermon, is obviously “painterly.” Similarly, there is no blessing of the “city and the world” in the film, nor any allusion to the Vatican hill as the future site of St. Peter’s basilica.

In place of the novel’s epilogue, the film produces a new final scene with Lygia, Marcus, Ursus, and the boy Nazarius on their way to Sicily. On the Appian Way, they stop briefly at the site of the apparition, pointed out by Nazarius. As they pause respectfully, Lygia finally remarks, “It is a sacred spot.” When they move on, the camera draws in on a blossoming fledgling tree which turns out to be Peter’s staff, planted into the ground by the apostle during the apparition. A voice declares: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

With this final shot, the film creates a powerful ending that is open to interpretation. On the level of the plot, the blossoming staff at the site of the Quo Vadis encounter reassures the viewer that the apparition of Christ had been real. This move – not attested in the novel – might have seemed necessary since the Quo Vadis scene itself had not featured Christ in person as the 1912 and the 1925 versions had. Instead, Peter recognizes a light, falls to his knees, and utters the famous Quo Vadis questions. To his surprise, Nazarius answers, telling him that “he was going to Rome to be crucified a second time.” After the vision ends, the boy denies that he had said anything, and it is left to the spectator to decide what to make of the incident. The situation is complicated by the fact that Peter is not fleeing from the persecution (which has not started yet), but heading to Greece where he plans to meet Paul. Immediately before the apparition, he had confessed his sense of evil foreboding to Nazarius, without knowing for sure that the situation of the Christians in Rome had deteriorated. The vision therefore does not provoke the dramatic change of mind that turns Peter from a frightened refugee into a courageous martyr of Christ. Instead, it only strengthens the uneasiness he had felt before. Besides testifying that Peter’s experience was real, the staff also ensures that the spot where he saw the vision and the later chapel stood could be correctly identified. Many viewers, of course, would not even know that the chapel existed, or care: but for
those Catholics who would care (including the hierarchy, whose approval of the film was commercially essential), it offers a coded allusion.

At the same time, the blossoming staff can easily be understood as a symbol for the vitality of the apostle’s message. Furthermore, the branches developed by the staff allow for a diverse view of church history: instead of one successor of Peter, as Sienkiewicz’s novel and Catholic tradition would have it, there can be various branches of Christianity, all blossoming.66

Alternatively, though, a blossoming staff can also be perceived as a symbol of religious authority, recalling the blossoming staff of Aaron. According to Numbers 17.1ff (King James’ version), after a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, Moses placed twelve staffs, each representing an Israelite tribe, into the Tent of Meeting, waiting for a divine sign. “The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Pact, and there the staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had sprouted: it had brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms and borne almonds.” The miracle confirmed Aaron’s position as High Priest. In remembrance of that event, a blossoming staff is sometimes used in Christian art as a symbol of religious leadership.67

Just as the miracle of the staff confirmed Aaron and his tribe as legitimate priests, the blossoming staff of Peter confirms the veracity of his encounter with Christ and, consequently, his role as the leader of the Christian community in Rome. Again, the reference is “coded”: only viewers who are looking for such a message will recognize it. The final voice-over reciting Jesus’ self-description as “the way, the truth and the life” is firmly non-denominational, though strongly Christian. Since the characters are literally on a journey into a new life, it confirms the happy ending. By combining the apocryphal stories, the gospels, and this final, symbolic miracle, the film generates various layers of meaning that help to bring viewers from different denominations together. While Peter’s importance for the young church and the apocryphal tradition identifying Rome as the site of his death are acknowledged, the consequences for the present remain open.

The 1985 miniseries banishes Peter completely from its final scene. At the end of the film, Petronius and Eunice commit suicide during a banquet, just as they had done in the novel and in the other films. But while the other films go on to describe the death of Nero before introducing the final scene, the 1985 version cuts directly from the dying Eunice to Lygia who is fleeing Rome on a tiny boat, together with other Christians. Nero’s death, on the other hand, is not shown at all in this version, possibly in an attempt to be historically more accurate, but also because the 1985 miniseries does
not require an optimistic end. The two scenes depicting the death of Petronius and Eunice on the one hand and the survival of the Christians on the other are linked by a filmic technique typical of the series: Eunice’s bloodied wrist is shown in close-up as it hangs loosely over the edge of the bed. The first detail of the next scene, also in close-up, is Lygia’s bruised wrist, hanging loosely over the side of the boat. The juxtaposition of life and death is, therefore, much the same as in the novel and in the 1925 film (except that it is not the persecutors’ downfall that is described).

The Christians on the raft, however, do not apparently have Peter with them, whose fate remains therefore conveniently open in the 1985 series. Instead, the dominant character of the final shot is a boy on the sandy shore of the lake (or river), running sand through his fingers and watching the boats as they make their way away from Rome. As they disappear, a boy’s voice recites excerpts from the Sermon on the Mount (“blessed are the persecuted, blessed are the meek, blessed are the seekers of peace, for they shall inherit the earth”). This boy is probably the same boy that Peter met in this version on the Appian Way and recognized as Christ when he went away in a beam of light. Choosing the sermon for the final voice-over enables the 1985 miniseries to connect to a wider range of spectators than a shot of Peter in the 1925 film or of Christ in the 1912 version ever could. The Beatitudes are not a matter of denominational dispute, and the selection chosen for the voice-over are potentially acceptable even without a religious background. As with Paul’s humanitarian appeal to Petronius to try to save the slaves of Pedanius, Christianity is here melded with any longing for peace and justice.

In the 2001 Polish version, Peter is very clearly the founder of the papacy. He is often accompanied by Nazarius who maintains a solemn look on his face, whether the occasion is a happy or a shocking one (in the baptism or in the arena scene). The young man (who appears to be considerably older than in the novel) helps the apostle by handing him his staff when he needs it (for example after the baptism scene in Glaucus’ house) or taking it carefully from him when he needs his hands free (during the blessing of the martyrs in the arena, which is given, in this film, in the archaic way by holding out both hands). During the flight on the Via Appia, Nazarius always walks a few steps behind the old man, catching up with him only when he stops to contemplate the mysterious light announcing the apparition of Christ. Having someone at his service conveniently distinguishes Peter as a person of authority. At the same time, the way Nazarius moves and behaves is not unlike that of an altar boy assisting a bishop during
services. For spectators who make this connection, the detail will reinforce Peter's role as a bishop, while the scene is still perfectly understandable for those who do not connect it to Catholic liturgy.

We have already discussed the political implications of the 2001 Polish version's recasting of the final scene. In this version, Peter returns not to Nero's Rome but to the modern city dominated by the dome of St. Peter's basilica (Plate 4.1). The juxtaposition of Peter and the modern Vatican points to the Catholic tradition that the institution of the papacy is based on an unbroken succession from Peter to the contemporary pope. It is inspired by the novel's epilogue in which Sienkiewicz turns from the Vatican to the “little chapel” near the Porta Capena with its inscription, *Quo Vadis, Domine?* The view of the old man in simple clothes in front of the magnificent dome of the basilica echoes the contrast between the buildings. While for some spectators, this image might lead to critical considerations about the differences between the simple early Christian community and the elaborate organization that the Church is now, this is not the point of the film: Kawalerowicz had planned the new *Quo Vadis* film as a contribution to the festivities of the Holy Year 2000, and only delays in filming pushed the actual release to August 2001.

**Conclusion**

The single most important problem for a film in dealing with the religious aspects of the story is the way the story of Peter endorses the claims of the papacy to spiritual and temporal power. The novel already finesses the issue by firmly endorsing these claims, yet not emphasizing them. The films use different strategies. The 1912 film gently associates Christianity with social justice. Two of the films, the 1925 and 1951 versions, use coded references to reassure Catholic audiences that the film is faithful to their traditions without making these allusions so overt that non-Catholic viewers would be likely to feel proselytized or excluded – and it is not too difficult to do this, since non-Catholics are unlikely to recognize the specifically Catholic messages. Peter may make the sign of the cross in the 1951 version, and he declares that where Nero rules, Christ will rule, but nothing explicitly tells the viewer that his martyrdom makes Rome the capital of the Christian world. Instead, the film emphasizes universal aspects of the Christian message: forgiveness, justice, and peace. Coding is not the only solution,
however. For the Polish version of 2001, it is not a problem: the film addresses itself primarily to the Polish-Catholic audience and so does not try to conceal the connection between Peter and the papacy. In contrast, the 1985 miniseries removes this connection completely. It emphasizes the composition of the gospels, which all Christians share, and even more than the 1951 version makes the Christian message universal by explicitly associating it with “humanity.”

Pagan religion does not pose a challenge to Christianity in any of the films. Its rites are either left out (in the 1912 and the 2001 versions), associated with black magic or bizarre cults (in the 1925 and the 1985 versions), or shown in passing as an impersonal ceremony without deep effect on the people (in the 1951 film). Philosophy is also marginalized.

All the films remove the novel’s overt anti-Semitism, though the figure of Chilo is still coded as possibly Jewish in the 1912 and the 1925 films. The 1951 and the 2001 versions point to the Jewish origins of the apostles. The 1951 version makes Paul a “rabbi,” stressing the shared ethical teachings of Judaism and Christianity, while the 2001 film gives this title to Peter, echoing John Paul II’s concern for Catholic reconciliation with Judaism.

Notes

1 Vinicius states outright (in a letter to Petronius) that “no rational mind believes in them” (QV 28, 233), and Petronius claims that Pliny says that he “does not believe in the gods, but he believes in dreams” (QV 1, 10). The names of Roman and oriental gods are used in exclamations such as “by Hercules,” as flattering address to Nero, who is called “Zeus” and “Osiris,” or to Poppaea. Nero cries out in tragic mode, “O Zeus, Apollo, Here, Athena, Persephone, and all ye immortals!” (using Greek rather than Latin names for them all).
2 This possibility is alluded to several times, e.g., QV 29, 240–1.
4 Venturini 1900/1901: 393 points out that Seneca’s stoicism had in fact many similarities to Christian teachings and criticizes Sienkiewicz for the inadequacy of his treatment of Roman ethics. On the letters, see Fürst 2006.
5 This detail is not found in Tacitus. In the novel, in a discussion with Marcus, Petronius likens Lygia to a Vestal Virgin (QV 40, 312: “you fell in love with a Christian vestal”).
6 In 1383, the city of Münster in Westphalia, for example, after being devastated by the plague and a fire, established its annual procession to ask for divine protection.
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7 Hill 2004: 247–51 argues that Petronius’ suicide subverts not only Neronian ideology but traditional Roman aristocratic ethics.

8 On Tacitus’ contrast of Petronius with Seneca, see Baldwin 1981.

9 See Babington and Evans 1993: 200 who observe that the novel omits any explanatory social-political context for the conflict between Jews and Christians, “leaving only a free-floating malevolence as motivation” for Jewish attitudes. The situation is different in Hubert Montheilet’s novel Néropolis, Roman des temps Neroniens, which was published in 1984, almost a century after Quo Vadis?. In this novel, which is largely an intertextual play on the Quo Vadis? narrative, “not only Christian claims over Judaism, but Judaic objections to Christianity, are articulated, in a situation too irony-laden to encourage prejudicial responses” (Babington and Evans 1993: 200).

10 We can find no reason why Vinicius here would refer to this insult as Greek.

11 Indeed, Dräseke, in a 1901 review of the novel in the Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie, objects strenuously to the Jewish appearance of the apostle Paul.


13 Claudius apparently expelled the Jews in 49. The main source for this is Suetonius Claud. 25.4: Judaeos impulsore Chresto assiduo tumultuantes Roma expulit (“He expelled the Jews from Rome who were constantly rioting at the instigation of Chrestus”); cp. Acts 18.2. See e.g., Smallwood 1981: 210–16, Gruen 2002: 38–41.

14 The passage of the Annales indicates that Tacitus was aware of the differences between Christians and Jews, whom Romans sometimes confused (for example, Tert. Apol. 21; Aug. civ. 6.11). A fragment of Tacitus about the destruction of the Temple quoted by Sulpicius Severus is explicit about both the close links and the lingering tension between the two groups (Sulp. Sev. Chron. 2.30.6). On the Jewish side, the earliest sign for a formal split is the Birkhat ha-Minim prayer directed against heretics, including Christians (probably composed between 80 and 90 ce, see Smallwood 1981: 217 n. 47).

15 The text poses some problems of transmission. In the Polish edition published by Paryski publishing (Toledo, OH) in the 1930s, the rabbis accuse the Christians of being enemies of Rome and Caesar only (p. 605: “nieprzyjacielmi Rzymu i twymi”), while the Polish text of Panstwowy Instytut Wydawniczy (Sienkiewicz 1949, Polish edition) p. 49 reads “enemies of the Law, enemies of mankind, enemies of Rome, and of you” (“nieprzyjacielmi Zakonu, nieprzyjacielmi rodu ludzkiego, nieprzyjacielmi Rzymu i twymi”). Curtin (1897a) p. 376 follows the longer version (“enemies of the law, of the human race, of Rome and of thee”). Malevsky in his English translation of the same year (Sienkiewicz 1897b) p. 362 has “public enemies of the human race, the enemies of Rome and of thyself.” The Hebrew translation by S. Ben-Avram (Sienkiewicz 1929) and the German translation by Lorenz (Sienkiewicz 1978)
define “law” explicitly as Jewish religious law ("Torah," Ben-Avram (p. 427) or "göttliche Gesetze," Lorenz (p. 162); the same is implied in the Polish text by the capitalization of "Zakon" ["law"]). The variants are possibly due to alterations in the original text facilitated by the peculiar way of publication (first in three different Polish newspapers and subsequently as a book).

16 Tac. Ann. 15.44: Nero punished “those hated for their crimes and called Christians by the people” (quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Christianos appellabat). Their beliefs are, in Tacitus’ own view, a “pernicious superstition” (exitabilis superstition), an evil (malum) and on the same level as other, unspecified “horrendous or shameful” activities (atrocia aut pudenda) that flourish in Rome (Tac. Ann. 15.44). That Sienkiewicz relied on Tacitus in the passage can be inferred from the form “Chrestos” (for “Christus”) that appears several times (e.g., QV 2, 20). “Chrestos” is found in manuscripts of the Annales and by most scholars is considered a mistake for “Christus.” See, e.g., Smallwood 1981: 211.

17 Typically, Greek and Roman writers believed that the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple contained the golden image of a donkey’s head. The earliest source is Mnaseas of Patras (second century BCE) quoted by Jospehus, Contra Ap. 2.9, but a variant of the story can also be found in Plutarch (Quaest. Conviv. 4.5). Diodorus Siculus reports that when Antiochus Epiphanes entered the temple after the conquest of Jerusalem, he found a golden statue of a man sitting on a donkey and holding a book.

18 Cp. also ad Nationes 1.11 and Minucius Felix (Octavian 9.3 and 28.2). A Roman graffito from the Palatine (ca. end of the second/early third century CE) shows a person raising his hand in veneration to a crucified man with an ass’s head. The Greek inscription beneath it reads “Alexamenos worships god” (ILCV 1352c adn = IGCVO 402).

19 See on this topic Dölger 1934: 219–20 and Freudenberger 1967: 105–7. It is unclear if Pliny’s claim in ep. 10.96.7 (written around 110 CE) that the Christians consume a cibus promiscuos et innoxios (“mixed and harmful food”) refers to this challenge. Cf. also Vettius Valens 4.15.4.

20 See his letter of March 28 1901 to Kozakiewicz, which was published in translation in an article for Le Figaro of May 7, 1901 (Une lettre de Henryk Sienkie wicz by G. Davenay), quoted in Kosko 1960: 144–5.

21 Renan 1873: 158–61. He bases this assessment on Flavius Josephus’ account about a Jewish mission that achieved the release of several priests held in Roman captivity. Their main supporter was Poppaea, who is called theosebes (devout). But since Josephus does not use the word as a technical term for the so-called “god fearers” (gentile sympathizers with Judaism), there is no strong evidence that Poppaea adhered formally to this group. Her pious attitude might equally well show a general reluctance to hold holy men as prisoners.
Paul Allard ([1885]1903) made the same suggestion more cautiously, though it is unclear if Sienkiewicz knew this work. Smallwood 1981 supports it.

Moore 1998. The producer, Sam Zimbalist, was Jewish, as were two of the three screenwriters and the director, Mervyn LeRoy.


Paul is played by Abraham Sofaer, a Burmese-Jewish actor who played both Jewish and oriental roles.


See the collection of his writings on this topic edited by Fisher and Klenicki 1995.

The rabbis who appear at Nero’s court wear mitres and long robes (QV 49, 376). Pagan priests carry palm branches and “the golden fruit of maize” (QV 2, 18 – “rice” in later editions of Curtin’s translation – he must have learned that maize is a New World plant).

Barron 2005: 146–7. E.g. in the novel Fabiola by Cardinal Wiseman, set in the reign of Diocletian at the end of the third century, the future Saint Agnes quotes passages from the Tridentine mass said on her feast day.

See, for example Chateaubriand’s Les Martyrs. In The Robe, Peter heals the dying Demetrius.

Cp. the most recent Catholic Catechism §1154: “The liturgy of the Word is an integral part of sacramental celebrations. To nourish the faith of believers, the signs which accompany the Word of God should be emphasized.”

The serious questions that had somehow to be solved are most concisely presented in Acts 10–11.

Scholars disagree about the account of the Jerusalem council in Acts but there was clearly disagreement among the early Christians. See Fitzmyer 1998: 538–67.

Acts 21.25: “As for the gentile converts, we sent them our decision that they should abstain from meat that has been offered to idols, from blood, from anything that has been strangled, and from fornication.”

Only once, briefly, does Sienkiewicz allude to a quarrel between Paul and the Jews, leading to Paul’s arrest and trial in Rome (QV 16, 139). It is not clear from the text that the Jews mentioned there are the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Biblical scholarship agrees that Paul’s letters are in fact real letters to specific people, not treatises presented as letters, as was customary for Roman writers.

There was an obvious biblical alternative: Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross for Jesus, is present in the Stations of the Cross just like Veronica.

Appealing to Catholics was especially important in Italy, where films were often shown in parish halls (Sorlin 1996: 71).
This depiction is consistent with Eusebius’ claim that Mark’s gospel reflects the teachings of Peter (Ecclesiastical History 3.39.14–16). Papias (second century), citing John the presbyter, is convinced that Mark became the interpreter for Peter and wrote everything down as Peter remembered it. According to modern biblical scholarship, however, this is an anachronism since Mark, while writing the earliest gospel, most probably knows about the destruction of Jerusalem which occurred several years later.

It is possible that the scene is inspired by the collection of sayings of Jesus known as “Q” which the synoptic gospels draw on.

In the film, the desire to relive the experiences of the disciples is expressed by a group of Christians who gather around Peter outside the city walls. While Peter passes on the teachings and important episodes from Jesus’ life, his audience is also eager to learn about personal details, such as the sound of Jesus’ voice. Peter seems surprised, but tries to answer the question.

QV 44, 349: “I see Thee, O Christ! I see you! Stars are falling to the earth in showers, the sun is darkened, the earth opens in yawning gulfs, the dead rise from their graves, but Thou art moving amid the sound of trumpets and legions of angels, amid thunders and lightnings . . .”

All Hollywood toga movies have had Jews as producers, directors, writers, or actors.

Discussions of the psychological problems of Hitler were already familiar (Kurth 1948), although they were to proliferate later. The celebrated study The Authoritarian Personality, which attempted a sociological/psychological explanation for his followers, was published in 1950.

For Peter’s reputation as an eyewitness see QV 20, 168 (about Peter’s sermon during a gathering of Christians): “That man had seen!”

The earliest testimony for Peter’s execution is the apocryphal letter of Clemens to the Corinthians but it is also recorded in the apocryphal Acts of Peter.

In some manuscripts, the crucifixion of Peter is presented separately as “The Martyrdom of Peter,” and it is sometimes assumed that this account formed the original core of the legend while the preceding events were added later.

The historical date of the apostles’ death is unclear and it is far from certain that they died on the same day. Having them both being executed on the same summer day, as Sienkiewicz does, reflects the apostles’ shared feast on 29 June in the liturgical calendar of the western church which goes back at least to the third century.

The execution of Peter and Paul is related in the apocryphal Acts of Peter. The original basilica S. Paolo fuori le mura on the Ostian Way was built by Constantine and replaced in 836 by a bigger church. St. Peter’s basilica is located on the site of a Roman cemetery with the presumed tomb of the apostle under
the high altar. One of the earliest testimonies for the sites is found in Eusebius’ 
*Ecclesiastical History* (ca. 200 ce) and attributed to a Roman priest named 
Gaius. For the tomb and the later development of the church buildings, see 
McClendon (1989).

51 For the chronological questions on Paul’s life and travels, see Haacker 2003; 
and Barton 2004.

52 See Morozzo della Rocca 1996: 517.

53 The preface to a 1900 German edition mirrors a certain uneasiness about 
Peter’s role when pointing out that “many historical details presented in the 
novel are dubious.” The two examples mentioned are the crucifixion of Peter, 
“which is purely legendary,” and the relationship between Peter and Paul “who 
was not at all willing to accept Peter as his superior” (*Quo Vadis? Erzählung 
aus der Zeit Neros*. Aus dem Polnischen übersetzt von Paul Seliger. Leipzig, 
Reclam 1900: 4). The same remark is in Dräseke 1901: 617.

54 This approach is quoted by Dräseke (who does not share it) in his 1901 review 
of *Quo Vadis*.

55 This idea is emphasized, e.g., by Paulinus of Nola (fourth century ce, e.g. *carm.* 
14.64f., *carm.* 21.29, where Peter and Paul are called *proceres*, “noblemen”), 
and becomes a stock motif in papal self-representation; see Angenendt 1989: 
7–44. The royal description of Peter and Paul was often noted in reviews; see 
for criticism Dräseke 1901: 616–17, and for praise Antonelli 1900.

56 Earlier in the novel, Peter is called “the greatest Christian leader of them all” 
by the narrator and Chilo tells Marcus Vinicius that Peter is the man “to whom 
Christ had confided the government of the whole world of Christians” (*QV* 
16, 139) but there is no explicit mention of the Vatican or modern papacy.

57 This is the wording of the intertitle in the European release of the 1912 
film. The American release may not have had the cross (cf. Ch. 4, note 14).

58 The process was completed in June 1890, with the approval of the “law on 
charity organizations” (“legge sulle opere pie”). According to the new legisla-
tion, all charity organizations were to be taken over by a “Congregazione di 
carità,” from which the clergy was excluded.

59 Before the unification, the Vatican and the Basilica were of course religious 
destinations of first rank for pilgrims but they did not have the prominence 
within the city of Rome they had gained in Sienkiewicz’s time. On the signifi-
cance of St. Peter’s basilica for the city of Rome, see Morozzo della Rocca 
1996.

60 On January 18, 1890, Leo XIII in his encyclical *Sapientiae Christianae*, urged 
Catholics to resist any laws that were contrary to church teachings.

61 Pickus 2004: 146.

62 In this version, the edict does apparently not come from Nero (who, when 
hearing about it, asks, surprised: “Christians? What meaneth this? Who are 
these Christians?”) but from Tigellinus.
The reason was either a general religious concern with showing Jesus’ face, as in *Ben-Hur* (where L. Wallace, the author of the novel, and his heirs had objected to showing Christ in full), see Babington and Evans 1993: 179–81, or a fear that secular characters like the crucified Spartacus might be likened to Jesus. In Spartacus’ case, the crucifixion scene was shot in several variants.

See Kittstein 2005: 90–1.

It bears a loose resemblance to the Guido Reni painting of Peter’s crucifixion in the left transept of St Peter’s.

As Castelli 2006: 11 suggests, the American values of the film are also, implicitly, Protestant.

A famous example is St. Joseph on the triumphal arch in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, holding in his hand a blossoming staff: see Thiermeyer 2003.
If we return to the issues raised at the beginning of this book, it is striking, though not surprising, that the history of adapting *Quo Vadis?* reflects the technical progress of cinema, the events of the twentieth century, and changes in taste far more than it does developments in Roman historical scholarship or archaeology. The most recent film (of 2001), after all, relies on nineteenth-century painting and the most iconic images of Roman art (the Laocoon, the paintings of the Villa of the Mysteries).

The most recent versions (of 1985 and 2001) differ from earlier ones most strikingly in their greater self-consciousness. While all the versions have to some extent assimilated Nero to whatever oppressive regime was most salient in their own time, the political subtexts of the two newest versions are overt as those of the earlier versions are not.

The 1912 film has a mild socialist edge, visible in its famous axe-and-sickle background, Lygia’s rejection of Vinicius as a patrician, the freeing of Vinicius’ slaves, and its final image of Christ as a breaker of chains, but it is clearly mostly “about” the ability of the camera to provide dramatic contrasts of darkness and light and to show crowds and the vast space of the amphitheater. The 1925 film, despite its fascist exultation of the mother, is mostly “about” Emil Jannings. In the case of the 1951 film, we know that Sonya Levien thought of Nero as a parallel for modern dictators, and the fascist feel of the crowd scenes is surely intended. The message, though, is mostly conveyed indirectly. When Paul suggests to Marcus Vinicius that he should conquer the world by love rather than through war, the proposal is so utopian that it could as easily distract the viewer from the film’s political implications as reinforce them. The transformation of Lygia from the ingénue of earlier versions into a self-confident woman, although it fits perfectly with the other ideological implications of this Cold War epic, is
an adaptation to the market. She is the kind of heroine American audiences would expect.

The 1985 Italian miniseries and the 2001 Polish film, however, although they stand at opposite ends of the fidelity spectrum (if the novel, not Roman history, is the standard), are both direct about their contemporary resonances. It is impossible to watch the 1985 series and not realize that its creators see recent Italian history, with its fears of terrorism and conspiracy, in Neronian Rome. One certainly infers that the miniseries’ use of historical material that is not in the novel is not primarily based on any interest in Roman history itself but mostly serves the political subtexts by introducing a possibly political murder and a conspiracy to assassinate the emperor. Again, its revision of gender stereotypes seems to serve both political and practical goals. Making Pomponia Graecina and Chilo’s wife brave Christians, and thus, in the series’ view, members of the non-violent resistance, is politically correct and may also attract female audiences. Making a heroine of Epicharis provides some titillating action and offers a whiff of feminism. The conclusion of the series emphatically refutes any hint of a Catholic future. Its universalism is unmistakable. The Polish version, in contrast, with its final shot of St. Peter’s, puts its Catholicism and its claims to contemporary relevance on display.

Only the 1985 miniseries, though, stands in a consistent relation to all the themes we have discussed. Because it has so much more time, is untrammeled by fidelity to the novel, and is politically self-conscious, it can offer a single, dark vision of life in a paranoid and oppressive state. It sets out to re-imagine the novel and its sources as a depiction of an ancient parallel for a modern police state confronted both by an elite opposition, the Pisonians, and by a popular, non-violent resistance movement (the Christians). Since the whole miniseries begins from a single premise, its treatment of different themes coheres: gender, religion, and politics all point the same way. Petronius, for example, as a basically decent man who serves a corrupt regime, cannot be allowed to have the kind of sexual domination over his slave that he has in more literal adaptations. So Eunice becomes a respected assistant and manager and his inability to see her devotion to him until his death is near becomes an exasperating instance of male blindness instead of a master’s arrogance.

For the other versions, we could not simply align the different issues that we have discussed to place each film on a single continuum. In the 1951
film, the romantic plot generally parallels the political implications, so that to treat a woman as an independent human being whose individuality must be respected implies also treating all people with respect. Christianity teaches basic American civic values that provide a basis for sexual and political right-thinking. Yet not everything coheres. The 1951 film makes the army the oppressor of Rome’s subjects and Marcus’ military background is aligned with his sexual aggressiveness, cruelty, and lack of moral imagination. Yet his military training is also the source of his capacity to save people during the fire, and it is the army that frees Rome from Nero. These different aspects of the Roman army and the character of the Roman officer could have been integrated, perhaps, but they are not. The film alludes to the evil of Roman imperialism as such but it does not, in the end, address it. It wants to promote democratic values but it does not fight against the novel’s demand that the Roman mob enjoy seeing Christians tortured to death.

Almost inevitably, these films are drawn in different directions by the allure of spectacle, the opportunities for extravagant acting that Nero offers, the “preachiness” that the plot cannot avoid (since Vinicius has to be converted), and the inherent difficulties of compressing the long novel and its baggy story. The very qualities that make it so attractive and adaptable also make it prone to incoherence.

Will there be another Quo Vadis? Is there still life in this elderly war-horse? Since films so often respond to other films, it is easy to imagine. The success of Gladiator prompted a brief revival of the epic mode, but Alexander and Troy quickly showed that not every big film set in the ancient world would be a big hit. Given enough time, however, and the right historical moment, it may well be remade yet again.

For classicists, these movies are a mixed blessing. Quo Vadis? and its filmings have been a significant source of knowledge about ancient Rome, some of it accurate. These films have at least continued to present antiquity as an important part of the past. Still, for us, the conservative force of the novel is a misfortune. It would be interesting, if we must have more films about Nero, to see one that showed him as a serious and competent performer. It would be interesting to see a rich depiction of the varieties of religious and philosophical experience possible for an elite Roman. It would be interesting to see the immense range of possible relationships between masters and slaves, from extreme brutality to genuine affection. It would be interesting to see an attempt at
showing the complexity of the Jesus Movement, or one that tried to see it as it would have appeared in its own time, without our knowledge of its amazing success. It would be interesting to see a film that engaged with the empire as neither a cruel oppressor nor a proto-European Community. But the scholars do not make the movies and mostly the movies are better for it.
We have already noted how the peculiar way the novel was published (first in three Polish newspapers and afterwards as a book) may account for the different versions of the rabbis' accusations against the Christians (see p. 213 n.15). Our attention was drawn to the different wordings of the scene when we realized early in the project that Chilo's possibly “Jewish” appearance in the 1925 film had a parallel in the Polish original and in the English translations we had access to but that the sentence identifying his mother as Jewish was absent from the German translation that I [Bettenworth] had read as a teenager. (In this version, translated by Hertha Lorenz in 1978, Chilo is simply Greek.)

A closer look at 13 German editions published between 1900 and 2003 revealed that they are divided over the subject. Three of the five prewar translations (Reclam 1900, Benzinger 1913 and Weichert 1918) give the speech of the rabbis as presented in the Polish original. They reassure Nero that Chilo “cannot lie” because “in his mother’s veins flowed the blood of the chosen people.” Only one edition (Weichert 1930s) leaves the rabbis out; a second (Hesse & Becker, 1920s) does not have the half-sentence that identifies the villain Chilo as the son of a Jewish mother, although a note on the front matter states that this was a “complete edition.” Seven of eight postwar editions, however, omit the half-sentence about Chilo’s mother. The omission is not marked. In the 1978 edition it may be included in an announcement on the cover that the translation was “revised according to contemporary taste” (“zeitgemäß bearbeitet”). Other translations do not acknowledge any revision. To our knowledge, the only full German postwar translation is the one published in 1994 by “Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag (dtv)” which includes a statement on the cover that this was a “complete edition” (“vollständige Ausgabe”). Although this announcement indirectly acknowledges that previous editions did not give the full text and although
the book contains a knowledgeable sketch of the novel’s fate, there is no reference to the history of its translations. A remark that “a century after the publication of the novel, there are little or no illusions about its strengths and weaknesses” is too vague to draw the reader’s attention to any particular problem.⁴

That German postwar editions would prefer a version that does not mark the villain Chilo as Jewish is only to be expected. However, given that at least two prewar editions cut the sentence as well, there may be multiple reasons at work here: Chilo’s Jewish ancestry is unnecessary for the plot, so the omission helps to straighten out the narrative. If there is fear of appearing anti-Semitic, it does in any case not pertain to the rabbis’ accusation which is left intact. A reason might be that the rabbis, while testifying against the Christians, are presented with some positive traits. They do not worship Nero like the pagans and, trusting in God, they defy him when he demands divine honors from them. Throughout the novel, resistance to the tyrant is marked as a dangerous and heroic deed so that editors may have thought it safe to keep this part of the scene.

The most interesting alteration is found in an edition by Weichert that omits the Jewish priests completely. It was published in Berlin, possibly in the 1930s, to judge from the outer appearance of the book (which gives no year). Weichert’s edition of 1918 has the full scene. The edition from the 1930s is slightly shortened (details of the love story of Marcus and Lygia and of the fire in Rome are left out or summarized) but the scene in which Tigellinus and Poppaea try to persuade Nero to blame the Christians is left intact. Only the introduction to the rabbis’ and Chilo’s accusation against the Christians has been significantly altered. In this version, there are “several people, mostly priests from the other side of the Tiber, who wanted to speak to the prefect [i.e., Tigellinus]. In their entourage was Chilo Chilonides. Poppaea drew Nero’s attention to the Greek.” The text then continues according to the Polish original, but neither the “priests” nor Chilo are marked as Jewish. Similarly, the conversation between Chilo and Vinicius on their way to kidnap Lygia at the Ostrianum (which is otherwise complete) is missing the paragraph in which Chilo claims that the Jews are the Christians’ bitterest enemies. In two other instances (Aliturus’ explanation of the Jewish and the Christian religion and Vinicius’ remark about “Jewish dogs”), the entire scene is missing or summarized in a way that does not refer to Jews. The only scene in which Jews are mentioned is Ursus’ fantasy about saving Jesus from the insults of the soldiers and the Jews. The publisher did not acknowledge the omission. Instead, a note on
the cover declares that this version was an “authorized edition” (“autorisierte Ausgabe”), although it is not apparent who authorized it (Sienkiewicz died in 1916). Apparently the editor tried to forestall accusations of tampering with the text. The reason for the modification (which gives Poppaea a more prominent role in the scheme against the Christians) is not clear. Weichert was not a Jewish publisher. The company continued to function throughout the Nazi era but did not publish Nazi (or other political) titles. It is not extant today.

In contrast to the German editions, the Polish and English translations we have seen print the full text of the scene. The same is true for a 1929 Hebrew translation by Ben-Avram, printed by the Polish publisher Stybel, then located in Berlin. This publisher produced a whole series of Hebrew translations of Polish literature, probably catering to the many Polish Jews who immigrated to Palestine during the fourth aliyah and who wished to learn Hebrew.

Problems of this kind are not limited to Quo Vadis? They are also difficult to detect for the average reader who does not have the means and the time to venture into the maze of textual criticism. Still, we hope to have shown that a healthy measure of caution even when reading “complete” or “authorized” editions of historical novels is a good thing. For classicists the issue may even offer some comfort. If tricky problems of textual transmission and interpolation are a hallmark of ancient literature, why should the reception of ancient literature be exempt from them?

Notes

Exkursus: Chilo’s Mother

13. Komet, Cologne, 2003, translator: Hugo Reichenbach (this translation was reprinted multiple times by different publishers).

2 The 1918 edition by Weichert does not mention the accusation that the Christians are enemies of the Law.

3 This also applies to German translations printed in Switzerland, e.g., the 1946 translation (third edition) by Rex-Verlag, Luzern, which leaves the half-sentence out but does not acknowledge any modifications. See also the 1949 license edition by Droemersche Verlagsanstalt, Th. Knaur Nachf., Munich, and the translation by Hugo Reichenbach (a postwar translation that has been reprinted various times, e.g., in 2003 by Komet publishers).

4 In the same context, the editors suggest that Jesus could be cut from the eponymous Quo Vadis scene (dtv *2004 [1994] 622). They are not clear about the purpose of such an omission which would render the entire scene obsolete or bizarre.

Description of the Films

1912 (Italy, dir.: Enrico Guazzoni)
Production: Cines
(Vinicius: Amleto Novelli; Lygia: Lea Giunchi; Petronius: Gustavo Serena; Nero: Carlo Cattaneo)

With 2,250 meters (1.4 miles) of film, this production of the Italian Cines company is one of the earliest full-length films. It was a huge success in Europe and America and its innovative filming technique (such as the deliberate contrast between individual and mass scenes) influenced other cinema productions for decades. It starred Carlo Cattaneo as Nero.

American film distributor George Kleine imported an (abbreviated) version to the US. He produced a booklet summarizing the content of the film in three acts (like a theater or opera production). The booklet is preserved (together with the papers of George Kleine) in the Library of Congress.

The film is available on tape in a black-and-white version from a private American collector. It has English intertitles translated probably from an Italian original and inserted by the collector.

The British Film Institute in London holds a copy with French intertitles, the Filmmuseum Amsterdam has a restored color version and English intertitles.

We have seen the private collector’s tape and the version in the Amsterdam Film Museum.

1925 (Italy/Germany, dir.: Gabriellino D’Annunzio, Georg Jacoby)
Screenplay: Gabriellino D’Annunzio, Georg Jacoby
Production: Arturo Ambrosio (Unione cinematografica Italiana)
(Vinicius: Alfons Fryland; Lygia: Lillian Hall-Davis; Petronius: Andrea Habay; Nero: Emil Jannings)
The film started out as an Italian production directed by Gabriellino D’Annunzio. When the Italian company ran out of money, German producers stepped in and Georg Jacoby was appointed co-director.

This version was published in a European and an American release. The European release was recently restored by the Nederlands Filmmuseum Amsterdam in collaboration with the Fondazione Cineteca Nazionale (Milan) and the Fondazione Scuola Nazionale di Cinema – Cineteca Nazionale (Rome). It has English intertitles. A copy of the American release (which is slightly shorter and shows small variations in the intertitles) is preserved on nitrate film in the Film Archive of UCLA in Hollywood.

We have seen the restored version of the Film Museum in Amsterdam and the unrestored American version.

1951 (USA, dir.: Mervyn LeRoy)
Screenplay: John Lee Mahin; Sonya Levien; Sam N. Behrman
Production: Sam Zimbalist (Metro Goldwyn Mayer)
(Vinicius: Robert Taylor; Lygia: Deborah Kerr; Petronius: Leo Genn; Nero: Peter Ustinov)

The film was the first big Hollywood epic after the war. It was produced by Sam Zimbalist for MGM Productions and was produced in technicolor. The team of director and screenwriters had been put together after an initial collaboration between Arthur Hornblow, John Huston and studio boss Louis B. Mayer had failed. The music was written by Miklós Rózsa who afterwards composed scores for many other toga films, such as *Julius Caesar* and *Ben-Hur*.

The film was shot in the Cinecittà studios in Rome and cost c. 12 million dollars, employing 60,000 extras for the arena scenes. While Peter Ustinov’s representation of Nero is famous now, it received mixed reviews when the film first came out. It is available on DVD.

1985 (Italy, dir.: Franco Rossi)
Screenplay: Ennio De Concini; Francesco Scardamaglia; Franco Rossi
Production: Elio and Francesco Scardamaglia (RAI)
(Vinicius: Francesco Quinn; Lygia: Marie-Theres Relin; Petronius: Frederic Forrest; Nero: Klaus Maria Brandauer)

The miniseries (six episodes with a total of almost six hours) first aired on RaiUno television in March 1985. It was shot in Yugoslavia. Its cinematic
technique, especially in the court scenes, is strongly indebted to Fellini’s *Satyricon*. With abundant time at their disposition, the screen writers developed several topics mentioned briefly in the novel into full plotlines (such as the Pisonian conspiracy and the murder of Pedanius Secundus). It also adds many new details. The result is a *Quo Vadis* story which is based rather loosely on the novel. The series is available on DVD.

2001 (Poland, dir.: Jerzy Kawalerowicz)
Screenplay: Jerzy Kawalerowicz
Production: Jerzy Frykowski; Józef Jarosz; Miroslaw Skowin (Chronos Film)
(Vinicius: Pawel Delag; Lygia: Magdalena Mielcarz; Petronius: Boguslaw Linda; Nero: Michal Bajor)

The film was shot in Italy, Tunisia, France and Poland. With a budget of 18 million dollars, it was the most expensive Polish film ever made. Its release was met by a huge media interest in Poland, but it never had the same mass reception in the West (although it ran for an Oscar in 2001 and played on film festivals in the US). It is available on DVD (Polish with English subtitles and in a dubbed Russian version).
Synopsis of the Novel and the Film Versions of *Quo Vadis*

The following tables give a synoptic view of the novel and the film versions discussed in this book. The left column contains a chapter-by-chapter summary of the novel (the numbers refer to the chapters in the 1897 edition of Curtin’s translation, published by Little, Brown and Company, New York). A √ symbol signifies that a given scene corresponds to the chapter in the novel. Important differences are listed. When the order of events differs from the book, the order of the film scenes is indicated by letters from a to z (and subsequently from aa to zz where necessary). The alphabetical order was chosen to avoid confusion with chapter numbers.

For Guazzoni’s 1912 film, we list the version published in the “Silent Screen Classics” series. It is the only complete version of this film we have been able to view. A color version was restored by the Cineteca Italiana (Milan), National Film and Television Archive (London) and the Nederlands Filmmuseum (Amsterdam), and financed by the Lumière Project-Media program of the European Community. It breaks off shortly before the chariot race (after the intertitle announcing that Petronius is greeted by Nero and Tigellinus). Both versions have English intertitles but differ slightly in their wording. The rare instances in which these differences are relevant for the interpretation of the film are discussed in the book. There was a (slightly shortened) American release of the 1912 film, but we have not been able to find a copy and do not have information about where the cuts were. A 1923 re-release which is preserved in the British Film Institute London and which Ruth Scodel has been able to view starts only with Petronius’ visit to Nero. It has French intertitles.

For the 1925 film by D’Annunzio and Jacoby, we list the version restored by the Nederlands Filmmuseum (Amsterdam), Fondazione Cineteca Italiana (Milan) and Fondazione Scuola Nazionale di Cinema – Cineteca
Nazionale (Rome). This version seems complete (although the film is slightly damaged in the scene in which Agrippina’s ghost appears to Nero). It has English intertitles. The American release we have seen in the film archive of UCLA in Hollywood originally consisted of 9 reels. Reels 1, 6 and 7 are missing today. The fragment starts with an intertitle describing Vinicius’ accident on the Appian Way (“Vinicius’ injury was slight”). Reel 5 ends with Petronius’ critique of Nero’s Troy epic (“Your conflagration does not blaze . . .”); reel 8 starts during the arena games, when Nero decides to have the Christians thrown to the lions (intertitle: “I hear them praying – send them to the arena, and perhaps their God will save them from the lions!”).

From the remaining reels, it is apparent that this version was somewhat shortened (there is no quarrel between Vinicius and Petronius after Lygia has been abducted by the Christians, and Nero’s second attempt to rape Lygia is left out). Some intertitles also have a slightly different wording. Relevant differences are discussed in the book.

Since the different structure and plotline of Rossi’s 1985 miniseries does not easily conform to a synoptic overview, the series is summarized separately. “Parts” and “Chapters” given in the summary correspond to the DVD released by Dutch Filmworks (“Miniserie Classic”).
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<tr>
<td><strong>1.</strong> Marcus Vinicius, nephew of Petronius, visits his uncle and describes how he stayed at the house of Aulus Plautius and Pomponia and there saw a beautiful Lygian hostage (Lygia). Eunice, a beautiful Greek slave of Petronius, is in love with her master.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Orty of Nero. A woman is thrown to lampreys. An edict against the Christians is read. Peter preaches in the catacombs. Common Romans are having an orgy. Edict is read again. Vinicius arrives in Rome by chariot. Vinicius visits Petronius and tells him about his new love. Flashback: accident on the Appian Way, first meeting of Vinicius and Lygia. Chilo gives a love-charm to Eunice who is in love with Petronius.</td>
<td>Arrival of Vinicius with his legion. Flashback to the crucifixion. Vinicius is ordered to make camp outside the city. He goes to the palace to protest and meets Petronius there.</td>
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<td>2. They visit the house of Plautius together.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>3. Petronius promises to help Vinicius get Lygia as a concubine.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. After Petronius persuades Nero to have her brought to his palace, she is taken from her foster-family. A devoted and incredibly strong servant, Ursus, goes with her.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Plautius seeks help from Seneca and then Vinicius. Vinicius is angry that she has been taken, but later Plautius gets a letter saying he bows to Nero’s will.</td>
<td>✓ Aulus even goes to the palace, but is not granted an audience.</td>
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<td>Aulus decides to ask Seneca for help.</td>
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<td>6. Vinicius goes to Petronius, who explains his plan to have Nero hand over Lygia to him. (This chapter takes place before the events at the end of 5).</td>
<td>✓ b)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Acte, Nero’s former mistress, persuades Lygia to attend Nero’s banquet.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>8. Lygia goes to the banquet and Vinicius lies beside her.</td>
<td>✓ c)</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Lygia is disgusted by Nero.</td>
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<td>10. The banquet continues.</td>
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<td>11. The drunken Vinicius sexually attacks Lygia. Ursus rescues her.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Acte, Lygia, and Ursus plan to have Lygia rescued by Christians when she is taken to Vinicius’ house.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Lygia meets Nero’s wife Poppaea and her child in the garden. Poppaea is jealous of her.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>a)</td>
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- **d)** Nero sings Troy epic. Petronius: Your conflagration does not burn enough.
- **f)** Petronius: Your conflagration does not burn enough.
- **g)** Lygia asks Ursus to help her flee. Cuts between the catacombs and Nero’s orgy.
- **a)** Lygia and “Lucilla,” a freed woman, meet Poppaea and her son Livius.
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<tr>
<td>14. Ursus and the Christians rescue Lygia from Vinicius’ slaves. Vinicius savagely punishes the slaves, killing one.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td></td>
<td>h) Lygia on her way to Vinicius’ house Ghost of his mother appears to Nero as he is lying in bed. Christians abduct Lygia, Chilo looks on. Vinicius sends the slaves back to look for Lygia Nero at the soothsayer Lygia is hiding in the basement of a house Nero on his way back from the soothsayer tries to rape her. Ursus rescues her. Tigellinus arrives. Messenger: Nero’s child is sick.</td>
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15. Vinicius is frantic. Poppaea’s child is sick. Her nurse suggests that Lygia bewitched her. Acte tells Vinicius that Lygia loves him.

16. Vinicius is frantic.

17. Petronius offers Eunice to Vinicius. She refuses to leave Petronius, who has her whipped. He realizes she must be in love, but finds out that she has no slave lover.

18. Eunice recommends a low-life pseudo-philosopher, Chilo, to help find Lygia. Chilo offers to find Lygia. Vinicius gives Chilo money. Petronius realizes that Lygia is a Christian when Vinicius mentions Paul of Tarsus. Petronius recommends Chilo. Vinicius goes to see Chilo. Petronius finds out that Eunice is in love with him.
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<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Petronius, at Antium, exchanges letters with Vinicius. He notes how much Tigellinus, his great rival for Nero’s favor, hates him.</td>
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<td>21.</td>
<td>Chilo learns that a man he once betrayed, Glaucus, is among the Christians. He hears that Paul is in Rome and Peter will soon arrive.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. Chilo tells Ursus that</td>
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<td>Glaucus is a traitor who should be killed.</td>
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<td>23. Petronius writes to Vinicius from Baiae.</td>
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<td>24. Chilo hires the famous wrestler Croton as a bodyguard, and Vinicius and he head for a secret Christian gathering to find Lygia.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>25. They go to the meeting.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>27. They follow Lygia to the poor home where she is staying. Chilo hangs back.</td>
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<td>28. Vinicius and Croton attack. Croton is killed, but Lygia stops Ursus from killing Vinicius.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o) Vinicius and Croton attack Ursus when he and Lygia leave the catacombs. Croton is killed, but Lygia stops Ursus from killing Vinicius.</td>
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<tr>
<td>On their way back from the gathering, Croton, Vinicius and Ursus fight. Ursus kills Croton and spares Vinicius. Lygia is not involved.</td>
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30. Glaucus and Lygia nurse Vinicius. ✓

Vinicius promises not to stalk Lygia any longer. She kisses him. He wants to marry her. Paul asks him to free his slaves. Vinicius refuses. ✓

31. Vinicius has Chilo brought so that he can bring a message to Vinicius’ household. (The narrative has again moved backward chronologically). Glaucus recognizes him, but forgives him. ✓
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<tr>
<td>32. Vinicius overhears Peter. He begins to love Lygia's soul.</td>
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<td>33. Vinicius confused by the Christians. Lygia is still in love.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>34. Lygia is conflicted. The severe Christian Crispus is harsh to her, but Peter tells her that love is not a sin, though she must avoid Vinicius.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>36. Petronius returns. He and Eunice are now lovers. Petronius tells Vinicius to forget the Christians.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Petronius and Vinicius at court.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
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</table>
| 38.   | Nero holds a banquet at the pond of Agrippa.  
Vinicius rejects a sexual advance from Poppaea. | ✓ | | |
| 39.   | Petronius advises Vinicius to beware of Poppaea.  
Veiled Poppaea approaches Vinicius. Other guest tells him: “It can mean your doom.”  
Petronius, Vinicius, Nero in Antium. | | | Nero plans to go to Antium.  
Petronius advises Vinicius to avoid Nero’s anger. |
| 40.   | Chilo tells Vinicius where Lygia is and urges him to abduct her.  
Vinicius has Chilo flogged. | ✓  
8) Chilo comes to get his money. Vinicius has him flogged. | ✓ | |
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<td>41.</td>
<td>Vinicius visits Peter and Paul. Paul agrees to go with him to Antium and instruct him. Peter blesses Lygia and Vinicius.</td>
<td>Vinicius and Lygia visit Peter. Peter blesses them.</td>
<td>✔ Paul does not go to Antium. He blesses Vinicius; Peter blesses Lygia and Vinicius.</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>Lygia and Vinicius agree to marry.</td>
<td>Vinicius returns home and frees his slaves.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>Vinicius tells Petronius the situation.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
45. Letter of Vinicius to Lygia

46. Another letter of Vinicius to Lygia

47. Vinicius slips back to Rome and tells Lygia what he is learning from Paul.

48. Petronius criticizes a poem by Nero, who thinks he must see a great fire in order to compose greater poetry. Tigellinus speaks to him privately.

Vinicius slips back to Rome to meet Lygia. Paul is not mentioned.

Tigellinus offers to burn Rome. Nero promises him a song to make him immortal. Vinicius gets Nero’s permission to marry. Nero gives him a box of jewels as a wedding gift.

Nero allows Vinicius to leave for Rome and tells him: “Come back with a ring.”
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<tr>
<td>49. The court at Antium is told that Rome is on fire.</td>
<td>✓ Tigellinus demands his song.</td>
<td>u) Messenger reports to the palace that the Circus Maximus is on fire.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. Vinicius heads for Rome to find Lygia.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>v) Vinicius goes to Plautius’ house, to find Lygia. He rescues her and little Aulus from the burning house.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51. Vinicius collapses and is rescued by Christians. He meets Chilo who tells him that Lygia is safe.</td>
<td>Vinicius is rescued by workers. They are not marked as Christians.</td>
<td>Vinicius rescues a child. He leads people into the sewers for shelter and into the Palatine against Nero’s order. He does not collapse.</td>
<td>No rescue by Christians. Chilo is with Vinicius when he wakes up and tells him Lygia is alive.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. The fire is accompanied by a collapse of public order.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>w)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53. Chilo leads Vinicius to a cave where Christians have gathered. Crispus gives a harsh sermon but Peter comforts the people and Vinicius.</td>
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<tr>
<td>54. The fire continues. Nero goes to Rome.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55. Nero climbs on an aqueduct and sings. A riot almost begins, but Petronius manages to calm the mob.</td>
<td>Nero sings from his palace. Petronius calms people. x) Petronius manages to calm the mob. No singing.</td>
<td>Nero sings from his palace.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>56. Vinicius rejoins Lygia and is baptized by Peter.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>57. The court considers how to appease the people. Poppaea and Tigellinus urge Nero to blame the Christians. Petronius urges him to take responsibility, and angers Nero.</td>
<td>Chilo and Tigellinus blame the Christians. y)</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>58. Two rabbis introduce Chilo to Nero. He tells them Lygia killed Poppaea’s child by witchcraft and other lies about the Christians.</td>
<td>z) Chilo whispers something into Nero's ear. Nero then proclaims the Christians arsonists.</td>
<td>Vinicius meets Lygia (in Aulus' house?). He heads to Rome to meet Nerva and plot against Nero. Peter decides to go to Greece and take Nazarius with him. Petronius is troubled because he did not tell the people that Nero was the arsonist. He could have introduced Galba, but did not because is now used to be an amused cynic. Vinicius decides to bring Galba to Rome. Petronius agrees and signs a letter to Galba.</td>
<td>Chilo slanders the Christians to Nero. Poppaea believes that Lygia has killed her child and accuses the Christians of hating all mankind.</td>
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<tr>
<td>59. Petronius warns Vinicius, but Lygia is arrested before they can flee.</td>
<td>Lygia is arrested. Warning of Petronius?</td>
<td>bb) Peter preaches in catacombs about Veronica. Soldiers arrest the congregation.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60. The mob turns against the Christians. Petronius and Vinicius try every form of influence they have, to no effect.</td>
<td>Petronius and Vinicius go to prison.</td>
<td>aa) The mob turns against the Christians.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>61. Vinicius goes to Peter, who prays with him for Lygia.</td>
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</table>

Vinicius goes to the prison to free Lygia, but is himself arrested. Lygia, Vinicius, Aulus and Pomponia meet in her prison cell.

Vinicius bribes a guard so Lygia is not thrown into the dungeons.

Petronius and Vinicius go to the prison. Petronius stabs a drunken gladiator.
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<td>62.</td>
<td>Poppaea is losing favor. Chilo is now powerful at court.</td>
<td>Chilo is now powerful. Arena games are about to begin.</td>
<td>cc) Vinicius meets Chilo at the house of Plautius. Chilo is now protected by Caesar.</td>
<td>Vinicius talks to a prison guard. Chilo is now powerful. The prison guard is Christian and will deliver a letter to Lygia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63.</td>
<td>Lygia is sick. Nero has Poppaea's son by her former husband killed.</td>
<td>Vinicius learns that Lygia is sick.</td>
<td>dd) Pomponia decides to follow her husband into prison.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64.</td>
<td>The beginning of the games. Lygia is not among the day's victims.</td>
<td>Chariot race.</td>
<td>hh) Beginning of the games. Lygia not among the day's victims.</td>
<td>Arena games begin. Vinicius sneaks into the prison. Crispus tells him that Lygia is sick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65.</td>
<td>Gladiators.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>66. Christians dressed in animal skins are killed by wild beasts. Nero sings.</td>
<td>Lions kill Christians. They are not dressed in animal skins. The rebellion of Galba is announced. Lygia reserved for special purpose.</td>
<td>c) Pomponia and other Christians are killed by lions. Peter blesses them from the stands and is arrested. At night, Nero examines the corpses. Peter marries Lygia and Vinicius in prison. Poppaea inspects the aurochs. It will be like a mosaic from Crete: “the maiden sacrificed to the Minotaur.”</td>
<td>Christians are killed by lions in the arena. They are not dressed in animal skins.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
67. Chilo finds the deaths hard to watch, but Nero insists that he keep attending.

68. Petronius and Vinicius form a plan to smuggle Lygia out of prison in a coffin.

Undertaker smuggles Vinicius into prison in coffin. Brings her tessera so she can get out.

Lygia refuses to flee because she is sick. The plan fails.

69. Lygia is moved to another prison and the plan fails.

70. More horrific executions. The dying Crispus curses Nero.

e) Christians are crucified in the arena. The dying Aulus accuses Nero of arson.

71. Chilo at court is in anguish. He finds out that the remaining Christians will be used as human torches.

c) The Christians are burnt as human torches.
72. Vinicius manages to reach Lygia in prison and they pray together.

73. Vinicius says farewell to Lygia and watches the Christians being taken out.

74. Chilo sees Glaucus being burned alive, begs his forgiveness, and publicly denounces Nero.

75. Chilo meets Paul and is baptized. He is arrested and tortured.

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- **72.** Vinicius watches the Christians being taken out.
- **73.** Vinicius watches the Christians being taken out.
- **74.** d) Christians are burnt in gardens. Chilo finds it hard to watch.
- **75.** e) Chilo is baptized by Paul and arrested immediately afterwards.
- **75.** f) At night, the crosses in the arena are set on fire.

Vinicius watches Lygia's life.
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<td>76. Chilo is executed in the amphitheater.</td>
<td>jj) Chilo runs into arena and accuses Nero. Nero kills him with bow and arrow.</td>
<td>kk) Petronius mentions the rebellion of Galba and angers Nero.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>mm) Chariot race. Pomponia is dragged behind a chariot, but frees herself and wins the race. She and little Aulus are granted mercy.</td>
<td>nn) The city welcomes news about Galba, but Nero is not impressed.</td>
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<td>77. Ursus prepares for death.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>g) Ursus, Vinicius and Lygia in prison.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78. Scevinus tries to draw Petronius into a conspiracy against Nero. He refuses. He unsuccessfully tries to get Nero to free Lygia.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ursus prays in the arena.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
79. Lygia is tied to an aurochs, which Ursus defeats. The crowd calls for them to be spared, and Nero gives in.

a) Lygia is tied to an aurochs, which Ursus defeats. The crowd calls for mercy, but Nero remains inflexible. People call for Nero’s death.

b) Vinicius is tied to Poppaea’s throne. Lygia is tied to a pole in the arena. Ursus defeats the aurochs that threatens her. The crowd asks for them to be spared, but Nero remains inflexible. Soldiers loyal to Vinicius defeat the praetorians who are about to kill him. Vinicius gives a speech, hailing Galba as the new emperor. The crowd cheers and storms the arena.
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<td>80.</td>
<td>Lygia is brought to Petronius' house.</td>
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<tr>
<td>81.</td>
<td>Lygia recovers. Petronius advises Vinicius to take her to Sicily.</td>
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<td>82.</td>
<td>Peter visits Lygia. The surviving Christians persuade him to leave Rome.</td>
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<tr>
<td>83.</td>
<td>Peter has a vision of Christ on the road and returns to Rome.</td>
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<td>ee)</td>
<td>Christians persuade Peter to flee.</td>
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<tr>
<td>d)</td>
<td>The surviving Christians persuade Peter to leave Rome.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>e)</td>
<td>Peter and Nazarius on their long-planned journey to Greece. Peter has a sense of evil foreboding for Christians in Rome. He has a vision of Christ. He heads back.</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Petronius warns Vinicius that Nero has decided to kill the apostles.</td>
<td></td>
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84. Peter and Paul are executed.

d) Peter’s verdict is read. He is crucified upside down.

85. The Pisonian conspiracy against Nero fails. He kills Poppaea.

c) Lygia and Vinicius are happy after their flight. No letter.

86. Vinicius writes to Petronius about his happiness in Sicily. Petronius, accused of treason by Tigellinus, writes back to say that he cannot become a Christian.
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<td>87. Petronius and Eunice commit suicide at a banquet.</td>
<td>b)</td>
<td>ll)</td>
<td>b) Petronius and Eunice commit suicide.</td>
<td>a) Petronius and Eunice commit suicide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>When reading Petronius’ farewell letter,</td>
<td>Galba’s revolt is announced.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nero throws a tantrum.</td>
<td>Nero is furious.</td>
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<td>The senate sentences Nero to death.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Epilogue: Nero, with Galba about to take power, flees Rome and finally kills himself.</td>
<td>g)</td>
<td>rr) Nero commits suicide at a watchtower in the countryside.</td>
<td>i) Nero blames Poppaea for his fate and kills her. Acte helps Nero to commit suicide. Vinicius and Flavius greet Galba. They talk about the future of the empire. Vinicius, Lygia, Ursus and Nazarius leave for Sicily. Nazarius shows them the place of the apparition. Peter’s staff blossoms.</td>
<td>b) The senate has sentenced Nero to death. Nero flees.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Miniseries: Rossi 1985, Italy

Disc 1, Part 1

Chapter 1
Marcus arrives in Rome from the front.
Letter from Petronius. Rome has changed. People live in fear.
Christians collect and compare gospel scrolls.
Nero is worried about a comet star predicting a change of rule.
Vinicius delivers a letter from his commander Corbulo to Aulus Plautius.
    He meets Aulus’ stepdaughter Lygia, a Lygian hostage, and falls in love with her.

Chapter 2
Aulus writes a letter to Petronius. Corbulo wants Aulus to attend a supper at Piso’s house. But Aulus will only go if Petronius is there.
Vinicius and Petronius at Petronius’ house. Petronius is fond of his slave Eunice. He will not go to the house of Piso because Nero suspects a conspiracy.
Vinicius asks the oracle of Mopsus for help in his love affair with Lygia.
Nero and his courtiers have a conversation in the palace.
Petronius and Marcus are back at Petronius’ house. Marcus tells Petronius about Lygia.
Petronius offers him any of his slaves, even Eunice. Marcus takes an oriental slave. Eunice complains that Petronius offered her to Marcus.

Chapter 3
Lygia and Vinicius meet at a river. Lygian story about the soldier and the maiden. Lygia needs money.
A lamb with two heads is born to the imperial herds, which is a bad omen.
The Christians send to Paul because Mark is out of material for his gospel.
Nero suspects a plot and is suspicious about Marcus stopping at Aulus’ house. Marcus denies delivering a letter.
Tigellinus suggests that Vinicius testify that Aulus is involved in a plot.
Poppaea warns Marcus to stay away from Aulus and Lygia because he deserves someone better.
Pomponia is put on trial in her house for atheism. Aulus declares her innocent.

Chapter 4
Marcus wants to give Lygia money, but she refuses because she cannot tell him what it is for.
Lygia plans to go back to her country. Aulus and Pomponia plan to go to the countryside to avoid Nero.
Aulus burns his toga but declares loyalty to Nero.
Petronius and Eunice work on the *Satyricon*.
Marcus is love-sick.
Nero is having an orgy. A Christian slave talks in her delirium about a new king.
Nero has Pedanius Secundus, the prefect of Rome, investigate the Christians.
Praetorians arrive at Aulus’ house and take Lygia to Nero’s palace.

Disc 1, Part 2

Chapter 1
Voice-over: Pedanius’ file about the Christians.
Chilo, a professional ‘informer’, tells the prefect about Lygia’s arrest.
Pedanius interrogates Lygia. He inquires about a strange guest at Aulus’ house and presses her to testify that it is Peter. If she refuses, people will assume that it is Seneca, plotting with Aulus against Nero.
Lygia denies that she knows Peter.

Chapter 2
Marcus and Pomponia meet secretly. Pomponia has received a letter saying that Lygia was taken away at Nero’s and Petronius’ request. She assumes that Marcus knew about the arrest. Marcus denies.
Marcus arrives at Petronius’ house. He is furious about Lygia’s arrest. Petronius explains his plan to have Lygia assigned to Vinicius as a gift from Nero.
At the palace. Acte warns Lygia of Poppaea. Lygia caresses Poppaea’s child and Poppaea reacts anxiously.
Nero’s banquet.
Nero sings and drags Lygia onto the stage. Poppaea is not amused. Poppaea’s child falls down unconscious.
Synopsis of the Novel and the Film Versions

Chapter 3
Lygia tries to help the child. Poppaea is frantic and warns her not to touch the girl.
On his way home Piso’s slaves stop Petronius’ litter and invite him to Piso’s house. Petronius refuses.
Piso delivers a letter from Seneca to Petronius, inviting him to attend the meetings of the senate.
At the palace: Nero teaches different kinds of applause.
Pedanius tells Nero about the investigation against the Christians. He claims that foreign politics is involved.
Roman priests believe that Lygia bewitched Poppaea’s child.
Marcus meets Lygia in the slave quarters where she is confined to silence.

Chapter 4
Party at Petronius’ house.
Chrysothemis and Petronius kiss.
Pedanius warns Petronius that Marcus is a weapon against him (Petronius).
Petronius should tell Marcus to forget Lygia. Their common enemy is Tigellinus.
Marcus refuses to give up Lygia and asks Petronius to help him.
Petronius asks Nero to free Lygia.
Lygia is being released. On her way to Vinicius, she escapes in an ambush of the Christians and meets Ursus.
That same night, Tigellinus informs Petronius that Pedanius Secundus has been murdered.
They go to Pedanius’ house.

Disc 1, Part 3

Chapter 1
Tigellinus has made sure that Petronius is appointed investigator in Pedanius’ murder.
Petronius interrogates Pedanius’ slaves. Marcus helps him.
They find notes on Lygia’s interrogation but the file about the Christians is missing.
Christians read the file smuggled to them by Pedanius’ scribe.
Chilo offers Marcus to find Lygia but they do not reach an agreement.
Petronius and Marcus have themselves carried in Pedanius’ litter on the same route Pedanius took on his last day.

Chapter 2
They stop at the brothel of Epicharis. Petronius pretends he has found a list of conspirators at Pedanius’ house, entitled ’Friends of Epicharis’. She denies passing on information to Pedanius.
Nero’s child dies.
Piso tells Petronius that he plans to kill Nero.
Nero and Poppaea quarrel. Nero claims they never loved each other.
Petronius and Marcus arrive at Chilo’s pub. When put under pressure, Chilo admits that he informed Pedanius about the Christians.

Chapter 3
Marcus and Lygia meet by chance in Petronius’ house, where Eunice has hidden her temporarily.
She cannot tell Marcus where she lives now but wants to take him with her. He refuses, and she leaves.
Tigellinus has Pedanius’ slave Gito tortured. He confesses the murder of Pedanius.
Marcus asks Chilo to find Lygia. They hire the gladiator Croton.
At night, they go to a gathering of Christians.
Crispus preaches penitence. Peter announces that Mark has completed his gospel and criticizes Crispus.

Chapter 4
Paul at Petronius’ house reassures him that Marcus is safe. He wants Petronius to prevent the execution of the slaves of Pedanius Secundus. Petronius is skeptic.
Christians hold a vigil with candles on a public square to protest the execution.
The imperial council discusses the slave affair.
Petronius argues for mercy. Tigellinus reports that the Christians are out in rebellion and the populus asks for mercy for the slaves. Nevertheless, they are sentenced to death.
The slaves are crucified.
Synopsis of the Novel and the Film Versions

Disc 2, Part 4

Chapter 1
Lygia asks Paul if love between man and woman is as good as love to Christ. Paul answers that love is all one.
Chilo offers his service to Marcus. Marcus refuses and threatens to have him arrested. Chilo flees.
Lygia watches a dancing troupe starring a girl who looks like herself.
Volusius Proculus, commander of the fleet at Misenum, warns Nero of Piso’s conspiracy. His information comes from Epicharis.
Nero heads to the house of Epicharis and threatens her.

Chapter 2
Epicharis is put under house arrest by Tigellinus.
The dancing girl discovers fire in a house.
Phaemius Rufus sees Piso at his villa. They talk about Epicharis. The fire in Rome does not seem serious.
Epicharis is arrested and put in the Mamertine prison.
In Rome, Chilo watches arsonists who claim they are foreigners.
Rome is burning.
Nero makes plans for a new city. He promises aid to the populace.
Crispus gives an apocalyptic sermon in the burning city.
Marcus is searching for Lygia.
Nero forbids Poppaea to go out and look after her son, Rufius.

Chapter 3
Tigellinus and Chilo meet while Tigellinus is demolishing houses. Tigellinus suspects that Chilo might know something about the arson.
Petronius shelters the homeless in his house.
Nero and his acting teacher practice Nero’s Troy drama.
Lygia helps the dancing girl flee the fire and gives her part of her shawl to protect her face from the smoke.
Marcus helps rescuing people. He watches ‘Lygia’ being buried under a collapsing house. He and Ursus clear the rubble and discover that the girl is not Lygia but the dancing girl.
The people’s mind turns against Nero.
Peter baptizes people, Lygia baptizes Marcus.
Nero promises to open his garden and fountains for the homeless. Piso gives grain to them to win their support. Epicharisis has been killed. The conspirators decide to support the rumors that Nero is the arsonist.

Chapter 4
Nero plans a new city. He taunts Poppaea’s son Rufius. Tigellinus tortures a man who has accused Nero of burning Rome. Nero tells his council that the people ask for vengeance and that vengeance demands victims. The council discusses a trip to Greece but the plan is postponed. Nero suggests presenting Tigellinus as a scapegoat to the populace. Chilo informs Tigellinus about the Christians and at Tigellinus’ instigation accuses them before Nero. Petronius speaks against Chilo. Nero decides to rid the world of the Christians.

Disc 2, Part 5
Chapter 1
Marcus and Lygia marry in the Christian community. Petronius does not go to the palace anymore. Marcus arrives and Petronius warns him of the impending persecution. Soldiers seal off the Christians’ meeting place. Lygia is arrested. Tigellinus interrogates Christians and releases those who desecrate a cross. Crispus refuses. The Pisonian conspirators decide to act quickly because Tigellinus is using the persecution to get rid of political enemies. They invite Seneca to be the new emperor but he refuses.

Chapter 2
Marcus finds a prison guard who is favorable to Christians. He manages to see Lygia in her cell. Polybia, Chilo’s wife, refuses to sacrifice to the Roman gods and is arrested. Marcus tries to convince Acte to help the Christians. Acte does not think she can do anything.
Synopsis of the Novel and the Film Versions

Chapter 3
Tigellinus interrogates Pomponia and Lygia. They are sentenced to death. In the palace, Tigellinus reminds Nero that he should come to the interrogations but Nero is only interested in his theater production, the burning of Troy. Chilo offers Marcus to help him free Lygia. Marcus talks to Tigellinus about Lygia. For her freedom, Tigellinus wants him to turn in information about Petronius and the conspiracy. Petronius and Eunice are now a couple. Petronius tries to convince Nero to set the Christians free but to no avail. Rufius, Poppaea’s son, angers Nero.

Chapter 4
Petronius tries to strike a deal with Poppaea: If she saves Lygia with the help of the Vestal Virgin, he will save Rufius. He will tell Nero that Poppaea is pregnant. If Rufius is killed, she will kill the child she is carrying from Nero. Tigellinus overhears the conversation and has Rufius killed immediately. Nero is plagued by nightmares. The Christians are desperate about the persecution. Peter comforts them. Performance of Nero’s Troy epic. Christian extras are shot with arrows.

Disc 2, Part 6
Chapter 1
Poppaea performs a ritual to conjure the dead Rufius. Nero is manic. Marcus and the prison guard form a plan to smuggle Lygia out of prison under a pile of corpses. Marcus tells Petronius that he plans to free Lygia and leave Rome. Petronius gives him money. Marcus sees Lygia in prison. They use a modified Roman and Christian wedding formula to “marry” again. Marcus wants to join the conspiracy and kill Nero to save the Christians.

Chapter 2
Nero announces his trip to Greece. The conspirators approach Nero and try to stab him. Acte and Piso are killed. Tigellinus rescues Nero.
Arena games. Christians dressed in animal skins are killed by lions. Lygia in prison is sick. Crispus delivers a threatening sermon to the martyrs.

Chapter 3
Christians are burned as living torches in Nero’s gardens. Chilo discovers Polybia among the victims. He accuses and attacks Nero. Tigellinus has Chilo crucified. Nero tries to talk to Poppaea who is still numbed by the death of Rufius. The Christian elders convince Peter to leave Rome. Nero wants a fight between a giant and a bull for his games. Petronius asks him to save the life of Marcus. Peter on leaving Rome has an apparition of Christ. He turns back.

Chapter 4
Marcus has fallen asleep in Lygia’s cell and is arrested. Lygia is tied to a column in the arena. Ursus defeats the bull threatening her. Tigellinus frees Lygia on Nero’s order. Petronius and Eunice commit suicide during a banquet. Lygia and other surviving Christians leave Rome on a boat.
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