

POPPAEA VENUS AND THE PTOLEMAIC QUEENS: AN ALTERNATIVE BIOGRAPHY

Abstract. This article examines the presentation of Nero’s wife Poppaea in the Oxyrhynchus papyrus fragment recounting her apotheosis (*P.Oxy.* LXXVII 5105). The poem arguably connects Poppaea to several Ptolemaic queens through characterising Poppaea as a devoted wife, aligned with Aphrodite. The image of Poppaea as representative of a marriage ideal is largely absent from more familiar literary accounts. Through reconfiguring Poppaea as the Egyptianised wife of a godlike Nero, the poem increases the relevance of several aspects of Poppaea’s biography, including her devotion to Aphrodite during life, her embalmment after death, and her divinisation especially. This interpretation supports a probable first century date of composition.

After her death in 65 CE, Nero’s wife, Poppaea Sabina, was voted divine honours by the senate, as well as a temple and official imperial cult. Aside from brief references by Tacitus and Dio, little evidence existed for this divinisation before Paul Schubert’s 2011 publication of an Oxyrhynchus papyrus consisting of 84 lines of fragmentary hexameter poetry (*P.Oxy.* LXXVII 5105).¹ The poem, labelled by Schubert as an ‘Apotheosis in Hexameters’, provides a unique narrative for the afterlife of Poppaea. In this poem, Aphrodite leads Poppaea from the imperial palace to a throne among the gods; Poppaea departs thence for the far North to watch and wait for Nero. This article contextualises the poetic narrative within the framework of Poppaea’s life, death, and posthumous honours. I argue that the representation of Poppaea within the poem pays tribute to the philhellenism of Nero and his interest in the Ptolemaic rulers, and reflects several imperial concerns dating to the brief period between Poppaea’s death in 65 CE and the death of Nero in June of 68 CE. The poem creates a demonstrable connection between Poppaea and the Ptolemaic women through characterising Poppaea as a devoted wife; this characterisation aligns the Roman empress and non-Roman royals with Aphrodite as the goddess of married love. The analysis of Poppaea’s portrayal leads to larger narrative considerations, for the poem has models in the apotheoses of the Ptolemaic queens Berenice I and Arsinoë II, as well as the catasterism of the Lock of Berenice II. After establishing the primary

¹ Schubert (2011). A high-resolution image of the papyrus may now be found at the Oxyrhynchus Papyri website:

<http://163.1.169.40/gsdll/collect/POxy/index/assoc/HASH017e/5b5c5d4d.dir/POxy.v0077.n5105.a.01.hires.jpg>.

characterisation of Poppaea as loving wife, and illustrating how this portrayal alludes to the Ptolemaic queens, I demonstrate how the poem elucidates contrary themes present in other literary representations of Poppaea, allowing readers to tease out new relevance in various aspects of Poppaea's life, death, and divinisation. The portrait of Poppaea within the hexameter poem is absent from the more familiar literary accounts of the empress given by Tacitus and Dio especially; the poem adds to our understanding of Poppaea's devotion to Aphrodite during life,² her embalmment as if an Egyptian royal after death,³ and her divinisation as Sabina Aphrodite.⁴ The marriage ideal represented by the poet's Poppaea reconfigures Poppaea as the Egyptianised wife of a godlike Nero. This interpretation of the empress leads to a reconsideration of the dating possibilities for the poem, and suggests a rationale for a first century date of composition.

1. The 'Apotheosis in Hexameters' and Poppaea's Devotion

The 'Apotheosis in Hexameters' presents Poppaea as a wife so devoted to her husband that she is unwilling to leave him even to live among the gods. A summary of the fragment and its representation of Poppaea clarifies Poppaea's role as a *diva*, and her expectations for Nero. The fragment opens with a Dionysian procession, and segues into Aphrodite's arrival by chariot at the home of Poppaea.⁵ Although Poppaea is unnamed, her identity is confirmed by her pregnancy at the time of her death and the repeated name of her husband. Poppaea does not rejoice in the news of her apotheosis, but rather mourns for Nero; Aphrodite reprimands her for her tears, promising that she will watch over her divine children in death. Poppaea travels in Aphrodite's chariot to the heavens, to join the banquet of the gods and the Muses. Once she has arrived, Poppaea is seated on a throne and is greeted with songs and dances. She departs for the far North and Boreas, where she presumably watches over her husband on earth, and waits for him to join her as a *divus* himself. The end of the passage is too fragmentary to determine the context of the apotheosis, and to establish whether the narrative of Poppaea's ascent is the focus of the work, or an *ekphrasis* embedded within

² E.g. *Oct.* 694–7.

³ Tac. *Ann.* 16.6.2.

⁴ Dio 63.26.3.

⁵ In appearance, the fragment consists of two papyrus sheets that have been glued together, with 42 lines of text on each side. Schubert (2011) 59–60.

an occasional poem.⁶ In either case, the copy extends the *Nachleben* of Nero's wife Poppaea centuries after her death, the focal point of the narrative.

The hexameter fragment recounts the moment of Poppaea's death in 65 CE, and affords readers an alternative view to the account transmitted by Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio, in which Poppaea died while pregnant after being kicked by Nero. Mayer recognises that this action repeats that of Periander against his own wife, and that this may serve as a *topos* of tyrants; the record thus likely reflects gossip promoted by Nero's detractors rather than a historical reality.⁷ It is entirely possible that Poppaea died from a miscarriage, without any impetus from Nero, and her death was later modified to suit a condemnatory portrait of the emperor.⁸ Suetonius uses the manner of her death as an illustration of Nero's tyrannical tendencies and uncontrollable rage; Dio, however, acknowledges that Nero's actions may have been unintentional.⁹ Suetonius and Tacitus agree that, despite her violent end, Poppaea was dearly beloved by Nero, and the emperor cherished her memory after her death.¹⁰ Her untimely end is rewritten in the poet's encomiastic tale.

The poem presents an opposing position to the defamatory accounts of the emperor's character given by Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio, and instead reflects the image of Poppaea given by material culture. The poet focuses on an idea of enduring love between husband and wife; Aphrodite, who has an especial connection to the empress, supports their love. This association is confirmed in material culture of Poppaea's lifetime: although few images of Poppaea survive, several coins and references to Poppaea's cult statues and sites indicate an iconographic association with Aphrodite.¹¹ The poem thereby reflects the Neronian propaganda by alluding to this public portrait.

The poem opposes the literary portrait further by emphasising Poppaea's isolation at the moment of her death; in this text, Nero is absent from

⁶ Schubert (2011) 63–4 suggests either a poem written on the death of an Egyptian official's wife, or perhaps an astrological poem.

⁷ Mayer (1982) 248–9; cf. Champlin (2003) 107–10 and Schubert (2011) 62 with references on the action as a *topos* of tyrants.

⁸ Mayer (1982) 249 discusses the possibility of miscarriage without any assistance from Nero.

⁹ Suet. *Nero* 35.3; Dio 62.27.4; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 16.6.1.

¹⁰ E.g. Suet. *Nero* 35.3 (*Poppaeam ... dilexit unice*); Tac. *Ann.* 16.6.1 (*amori uxoris obnoxius erat*).

¹¹ E.g. Kragelund (2010) 559 n. 4 notes a provincial bronze coin from Laodicea showing Venus on the reverse and a bust labelled ΠΟΠΠΑΙΑ ΣΕΒΑΣΤΗ on the obverse (*RPC* 1, 2924, dated CE 62–5); cf. Wood (1999) 313 on coin issues stamped with the name of Poppaea.

his wife's apotheosis. Rather, Aphrodite arrives with her son Eros at the home of Poppaea, where she discovers the pregnant woman inside, alone. The scene is that of a chaste household, in which a loyal wife awaits her husband. Aphrodite enters, and goddess and devotee share a private moment in the interior woman's chambers: Poppaea is unwilling to leave, and laments (*γόνον*, 17). Her belly swells in pregnancy, referred to as a duty 'accomplished for Nero' (... *εὔρε δ' ἀνασσαν ἐῆς ἐπὶ γαστέρ[[α]] ὅς ὄγκωι | μ]έννην· καὶ μὴνὶ πα . ου [.] ἐτέλεσσε Νέρωνι*, 15–16).¹² In these lines, the poet emphasises that the purpose of marriage was the production of children; for Poppaea, this purpose had the added importance of the production of a dynastic heir. A level of pathetic irony is present in the verb (*ἐτέλεσσε*): Poppaea's duty towards the emperor has not yet reached fulfilment, since the child has not yet been born.¹³ Readers may recall that the daughter she bore to Nero died within four months and was divinised; Poppaea's unborn child seems the last hope of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.¹⁴ Although Aphrodite promises her that Zeus' stars are establishing her on the moon, and that Fate has grand plans for her (lines 19–22), Poppaea remains unwilling to depart. Aphrodite's words fail to appease the weeping woman, whose lament gains *charis* for her household (*P.Oxy.* LXVII. 5105.20–7):

]νος ἔνθεν ἀνακτι πο[.....τ]εὔχε δὲ Μοῖρ[α
 -οτ]έρην σε, μάκαιρα, γάμου [.. τέ]κνα Νέρωνι
]. ους αἰῶνασ.. ου..... [.] φυλάξεις',
 ὡς φα]μένη χερὸς ἦγε κατηφέα μὴδὲ δοθέντι
]ιανθεῖσαν· ἔλειπε γὰρ ἴσον ἀκοίτην
 ἀθανάτ]οις, ἀδινὸν δὲ πόθωι στένεν· εἶπε δ' ἐπ' ἄκρων
 σταῖσα δ]όμων πύματόν τε, χαρίζετο δ' ἀμφὶ μελάθροισ·
 ']ν οὐκ ἐβάρυνα, πόσι, θρόνον, εἴ σ' ἐφύλαξα [

'whence ... ruler. Fate has made
 you more ... than marriage, you blessed one; your children for
 Nero you will guard for eternity ...'

Having thus spoken, (Aphrodite) led her by her hand; she was
 downcast and did not rejoice in the offered (favour). For she was
 leaving her husband, (a man) equal to the gods, and she moaned loud-

¹² Text and translation of *P.Oxy.* LXXVII. 5105 is that of Schubert (2011). All other translations, unless otherwise marked, are my own.

¹³ Schubert gives 'accomplished' for *ἐτέλεσσε*.

¹⁴ See Tac. *Ann.* 15.23.1–3 on Claudia Augusta, the daughter of Poppaea and Nero.

ly from her longing. Standing on the rooftop, she spoke her last words, and brought pleasure about the house:

‘I did not burden the ... throne, my husband, if I protected you...’

In line 26, Schubert translates *χαρίζετο* as ‘brought pleasure’, but I argue that this verb is more closely aligned with the conferment of *χάρις* as grace or favour, and should be associated with Poppaea’s transition to a divinity. The idea that *charis* may spread about an entire household emphasises Poppaea’s positive influence over the imperial *domus*, and suggests a sincerity in her speech that has an immediate effect: her departure does not necessarily bring pleasure to the house, but may confer divine favour through creating an association between the imperial household and its newly divine member. Poppaea’s love for Nero is evident: she mourns being separated from a man ‘equal to the gods’ (lines 24–5). On first reading, the end of line 24, *ἴσον ἀκοίτην*, suggests the idea of an equal partner in marriage, creating a parallel status between husband and wife; however, the equality is redefined with the addition of *ἀθανάτους* in the following line. The enjambment inserts the term ‘husband’ between the halves of the phrase ‘equal to the gods’; from the poetic Poppaea’s perspective, Nero’s primary role is as her husband. Without copying the Homeric phrase, *δαίμονι ἴσος*, the poet suggests the idea of an epic hero, striving towards but never reaching divinity; the moment adds pathos through emphasising the distance between Nero and actual divine status as compared to the newly acquired divinity of his wife.

Nero’s characterisation is not limited to a Homeric comparison, but has a spatial dimension as well. I contend that this phrase recalls the opening of Sappho, fr. 31; both the Homeric epithet and Sappho’s description occur at line ends, prompting a comparison.¹⁵ An emphasis on spatial distance and parallel focalisations between Sappho and the hexameter fragment increase the emotional effect of the moment. Whereas Sappho’s narrator is separated from the beloved by no more than the length of a room, Poppaea is separated by all the heavenly bodies. In fr. 31, the lover praises the fortunes of the one conversing with the beloved; from the lover’s perspective, the listener is similar to a divinity perhaps due to his very proximity to the beloved and his ability to hear her voice and laughter.¹⁶ In the hexameter poem, the attestation of Nero’s character is focalised by Poppaea and framed by references to Poppaea’s mourning and her two speeches; Nero’s divine-like status intensifies Poppaea’s longing, and is enhanced not by his proximity to another, but

¹⁵ E.g. *Il.* 5.438; cf. Sappho fr. 31.1 *ἴσος θεοισιν*.

¹⁶ Sappho fr. 31.1–5.

by his increasing distance from her. The poet's use of *πόθος* extends beyond Poppaea's desire for her husband to be with her at the moment of her death; Poppaea not only mourns, but moans loudly with desire for her husband (25). Through recalling Sappho, the poet builds an impression of emotional attachment as well as sexual desire between Poppaea and her husband. The poignancy of the reference to Nero's equivalency to the divine thus hinges on literary reminiscences, and emphasises the wife's love and desire for her beloved. From a historical perspective, the phrase may also echo the association between Nero and the divine that increased in the latter years of his life; however, this phrase would ring hollow for an audience aware of Nero's violent death and the denial of divine honours.

The poet's Poppaea does not dwell on Nero's divine qualities or her desires, but turns to domestic concerns: her fragmentary farewell speech mentions Nero's throne, their marriage and bedchamber, misfortune, her child, and perhaps Nero's remaining on earth. The repetition of words for marriage and the household illustrate Poppaea's married status, and Poppaea's imperial role to support and protect Nero's imperial line. The repetition of Nero's name stresses the imperial model. Poppaea has tried to accomplish her role as mother for Nero's heir (16); she will guard her children for Nero for eternity (21); as she leaves, she does something in reference to Nero (41); and again Nero's name is mentioned in line 71, without context; Nero's primary label is as Poppaea's husband (*ἀκοίτην*, 24; *πόσι*, 27, *ἀκοίτην*, 68, *σύν[ε]υνον*, 74).

The focus of Poppaea's lament is twofold: she is unwilling to leave her beloved, and laments that she will serve as the guardian of divine children in heaven, rather than of living children in the imperial household. Poppaea's new role is underscored: she gives her speech from the rooftop of the house, as if serving as its protective *daimôn*. Standing beside Aphrodite, she begins her transition from empress to divinity. Aphrodite has defined Poppaea's duty among the gods as protecting her divine children (*φυλάξεις*, 22), yet Poppaea expands this responsibility to include continuing her dedication to protecting Nero and his throne (*ἐφύλαξα*, 27). Schubert gives 'guard' for line 22 and 'protect' for line 27; however, the implication of preservation or of maintenance deserves further attention. The repetition of the verb emphasises that Poppaea will watch over her children and has done so for Nero and his household; the poet draws together the past and future explicitly, linking the empress' divine role to her position on earth. Poppaea's perspective is highlighted by terms used to identify her within the poem. Poppaea, unnamed, is referred to as the lady and/or queen of the house (*ἄνασσαν*, 15;

cf. 39);¹⁷ Aphrodite greets her as ‘child’ (τέκνον, 18) and as ‘blessed’ (μάκαιρα, 21), but Poppaea refers to herself as the wife (ἀλόχου, 31). The references bring to light two contrasting perspectives: Aphrodite shows her patronage of Poppaea, and centres her discussion on Poppaea’s divine future, whereas Poppaea self-identifies as Nero’s wife. Poppaea’s movement, from her inner chambers to the rooftop, illustrates the first stage in her unwilling transition from wife to protective divinity.

Poppaea’s speech shows her devotion to her husband. One additional term concludes her portrayal as an ideal wife. In addition to her other titles, Poppaea may be identified as a *παρθένος* (20, of which only *-νος* is extant).¹⁸ The poet thus recognises Poppaea’s two momentous transitions: from *parthenos* to the wife of the emperor, and from empress to divinity. The poet suggests a smooth transition from *parthenos* to wife, depicting Poppaea as an ideal *univira*; he elides Poppaea’s marriages to Rufrius Crispinus and Otho that preceded her marriage to Nero, and ignores her child with Crispinus. The title of *parthenos* implies an unmarried status at the time she wed Nero, rewriting Poppaea’s biography by creating Poppaea as a wife dedicated to one man throughout her life, and, in Poppaea’s case, even after death.¹⁹

When she arrives in the heavens, Poppaea is greeted by Themis, and the Muses join in song (59); something is poured around Poppaea’s girdle, and she is seated on a throne.²⁰ A celebration is held, the gods gather, and she observes the dances of the blessed ones (60–8). Poppaea’s position as enthroned matron is statuesque; she hears the chorus of the Muses, and observes the gods in a moonlit dance. The dance and song are suggestive of ritual activity, performed before a cult statue. Poppaea is seated on her throne and observes the rites enacted in her honour. As promised by Aphrodite, Poppaea has been established as a divinity perhaps associated with the moon and the goddess associated with this heavenly body, the *parthenos* Artemis.²¹ She abstains from the celebrations, praying and watching for Nero, until she departs for Boreas, where she watches for Nero (68–74). Pop-

¹⁷ Cf. Schubert (2011) 76 *ad* 15 for the meaning of queen, ‘especially in an Oriental setting’.

¹⁸ Schubert (2011) 77 *ad* 20 with references.

¹⁹ This is not the only poet to create the fiction of the *univira* married to the emperor; Horace implies a similar status for Livia in the phrase *unico gaudens mulier marito* (Hor. *Carm.* 3.14.5), and Ovid expresses a similar sentiment about Livia at *Trist.* 2.161–4.

²⁰ Schubert (2011) 79 *ad* 61–2 suggests that the reference to the girdle implies that perhaps Poppaea gives birth to her child in the heavens, drawing a parallel with the birth of Apollo from Leto (Call. *Hymn* 4.222).

²¹ The word *σελήνης* is not present at the end of line 67, but suggested by the editors *ad loc.*

paea's devotion to Nero visibly extends to the heavens, where she prays, and subsequently departs from the company of the gods to await her husband. Poppaea assumes that Nero will join her as a divinity, and accepts her intermediary status as a divinity with no share in the joys of her position. Her overarching portrait as an ideal wife is confirmed: she honours her husband and children in life and after death, and deserves the honours she receives from the gods. Her extreme devotion finds precedents in the Ptolemaic queens, whose apotheosis narratives further our understanding of the poetic portrait of Poppaea and distance this portrait from those of Tacitus and Dio.

2. Ptolemaic Queens and Married Love

The composition of *P.Oxy.* LXXVII 5105 in Greek hexameters prompts readers to look for models in style and content. Although there seem to be no direct allusions in the extant fragment, Schubert acknowledges several Hellenistic poems that present similar portrayals of the Ptolemaic queens; such poems shed light on the presentation of Poppaea and her connection to Aphrodite, and construct an image of the empress as a dynastic queen. The apotheosis has overarching narrative models in Theocritus' celebration of the apotheosis of Berenice I, wife of Ptolemy I Soter (*Theoc. Idyll* 17), Callimachus' *Ektheôsis Arsinoês* on the death of Arsinoë II (Call. fr. 228 Pf.), and Callimachus' account of the catasterism of the lock of Berenice II, cousin and wife of Ptolemy III Euergetes (Call. *Aet.* fr. 110 Pf.).²² Poppaea is associated with the Ptolemaic queens as a devotee of Aphrodite, as evidenced by material culture: Ptolemaic queens from Berenice I to Cleopatra VII were assimilated to both Greek and Egyptian deities associated with fertility, such as Aphrodite and Isis, and were granted titles such as *karpophoros* that stressed their motherhood.²³ Aphrodite became the 'dominant model' for cult worship of royal women from the heirs of Alexander throughout the Hellenistic period.²⁴ The ideal of married love displayed by the Ptolemies contributes to an equal partnership and a lasting dynasty.²⁵

²² Cf. Hyg. *Astron.* 2.4 on the catasterism of the lock; Pl. *N.H.* 2.71 notes that the star is not seen in Italy.

²³ Rose (1997) 4–7.

²⁴ Carney (2012) 312 notes the assimilation between the Ptolemaic queens and Aphrodite, and that of the Macedonian noblewomen before them. On the Ptolemaic queens and their especial devotion to Aphrodite see Carney (2000) 209–25; Pomeroy (1984) 3–40. Cheshire (2007) 164 suggests that, from the fourth century onwards, Aphrodite replaced Hera as the goddess associated with marriage and the virtues associated with being a wife. Arsinoë II also sponsored the Adoneia festival for Adonis and Aphrodite commemorated in Theocritus' *Idyll* 15; see Foster (2006) on the encomiastic elements in *Idyll* 15 cel-

The connection between Poppaea and the Ptolemaic queen Berenice I centres on the role of Aphrodite, Poppaea's divine guide to the stars. The deification of Berenice I is commemorated in Theocritus' *Idyll* 17, within an encomium of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, husband and brother of Berenice's daughter, Arsinoë II. Theocritus recalls Berenice's divinisation: Aphrodite takes Berenice away and establishes her in her own temple, and the goddess shares with her some of her own rights.²⁶ Aphrodite is the patroness of Berenice's and Ptolemy's love for each other, and of Berenice's motherhood; the celebration of their love leads to a general axiom on reciprocal love as contributing to an enduring household (Theoc. *Id.* 17.34–42). Ptolemy and Berenice's love contributes to a well ordered home, and is visible in the production of exemplary children: Berenice bears a warrior Ptolemy to a warrior Ptolemy.²⁷ Once established in the temple of Aphrodite, Berenice's divine role is to comfort lovers who have lost a beloved, like her own husband, and to inspire love in others.²⁸ This love creates noble households that last for generations. The success of their exemplary love has been proven in the succession from Ptolemy to Ptolemy, and Ptolemy II honours his parents for providing the model.

Theocritus praises Ptolemy II Philadelphus, husband of Arsinoë II, for setting a standard for ruler cult and the deification of the dynastic couple.²⁹ He is the first to dedicate altars and shrines to his mother Berenice I and father Ptolemy I Soter, thereby ensuring their lasting memory.³⁰ In material

ebrating Arsinoë II as comparable to, and even exceeding, Homeric models, and as looking forward to her apotheosis.

²⁵ On conjugal love and fidelity as a Ptolemaic ideal see Rossi (2000) 299ff.; Gutzwiller (1992); Koenen (1983) 161ff. On marital devotion, Hunter (2003) 129 observes, 'The theme subsequently became a standard motif of Hellenistic ruler-ideology.'

²⁶ Theoc. *Id.* 17.48–50; cf. *Id.* 15.106–8; on which see Schubert (2011) 61; Fraser (1972) 197.

²⁷ Theoc. *Id.* 17.56–57.

²⁸ Theoc. *Id.* 17.51–2: *πάσιν δ' ἥπιος ἦδε βροτοῖς μαλακούς μὲν ἔρωτας / προσπνείει, κούφας δὲ διδοῖ ποθέοντι μερίμνας* ('With gentle breath she both inspires all mortals to soft desires and lightens the cares of he who has loved and lost').

²⁹ See Parca (2012) 318: 'In 272/1 BCE, Ptolemy II instituted a cult of himself and Arsinoë as the 'brother-sister gods'; Arsinoë was deified after her death in 270 BCE; Ptolemy III Euergetes and Berenice II were honoured as 'benefactor gods', and honoured their parents Ptolemy II Philadelphus and Arsinoë as saviour gods. See Pfeiffer (2008) on Ptolemy II aligning the cult of himself and Arsinoë II to that of Serapis and Isis.

³⁰ See Theoc. *Id.* 17.121–5. Griffiths (1979) 73 notes, 'Theocritus takes another look at how the Theoi Soteres were saved from the oblivion attending other dynasties—in this case, by being promoted to cult.'

culture, Ptolemy II appears with his wife on the obverse of coins that display the diademed busts of his parents on the reverse, imagery that stresses the continued dynasty.³¹ Ptolemy and Arsinoë offer sacrifices together, and Theocritus singles out Arsinoë as the best of all wives for her whole-hearted love of her husband.³² Arsinoë thus emulates Berenice, and surpasses her model.

Poppaea's biography parallels that of Arsinoë II more closely than that of either Berenice I or Berenice II, as Poppaea also died before her husband, leaving no children.³³ Both women received cult titles as Aphrodite, and the particulars of Arsinoë's cult and assimilation to Aphrodite assist in refining Poppaea's divine responsibilities. Arsinoë was the first Ptolemy to receive the cult title of Aphrodite: she received her own temple and honours as Arsinoë–Aphrodite–Zephyritis, and a dedication to Aphrodite Akraia Arsinoë attests to her connection with the goddess as well.³⁴ Arsinoë's death in 270 BCE is commemorated by Callimachus (fr. 228 Pf.). In this fragment, the Dioscuri lead the queen to a place among the stars, and grief teaches Arsinoë's husband the rites and offerings for the dead (fr. 228.11–13 Pf.). The fragment does not preserve an account of Arsinoë's ascent; however, the role of the divine is comparable to that of Aphrodite with Berenice, and the grief of Arsinoë's husband suggests a similar level of devotion.

The apotheoses of Berenice I and Arsinoë II provide examples for the role of the divine in the ascent of a female leader; Poppaea's journey is similarly engineered by the goddess Aphrodite. In these examples, Aphrodite has taken the place of Hera as the goddess overlooking the marriage and motherhood of the ruling couple; marital *êros* is reflected in poetry and cult honouring ruling Ptolemaic women, and in the representation of Poppaea as a devoted *parthenos* with a strong desire (*pothos*) for her husband. Aphrodite is the best divinity to illustrate that marital devotion is accompanied by desire. The divinity also has a role in defining the divine obligations of the apotheosised woman: Aphrodite gave Berenice a share in her rites and her ritual space, and the divine role to inspire lovers, and to watch over those suffering owing to separation from a beloved. Poppaea, on the other hand, has an obligation as a divinity to care for her children. Both Poppaea and the Ptolemies are celebrated for providing an image of married love that contributed to the continuation of their dynasty. However, Poppaea's pregnancy and re-

³¹ E.g. Rose (1997) 5 n. 29 and Plate 1. See Griffiths (1979) 77 for further references.

³² Theoc. *Id.* 17.128–30: τὰς οὐτίς ἀρείων / νυμφίον ἐν μεγάροισι γυνὰ περιβάλλετ' ἀγοστῶ, / ἐκ θυμοῦ στέργοισα κασίγνητόν τε πόσιν τε ('she is a better wife than any bridegroom held in his arms in his halls, since she cherishes him, both brother and husband, with her heart').

³³ As noted by Schubert (2011) 63.

³⁴ Fraser (1972) 197.

sponsibility to watch over her divine children in the heavens distinguishes Poppaea from the Ptolemies; for readers knowledgeable of Poppaea's biography, the detail also draws attention to Poppaea's failure to produce Nero's heir. One additional comparison helps in the identification of Poppaea's unique divinisation and possible cult worship: the catasterism of the lock of Berenice, celebrated at the closing of Book 4 of Callimachus' *Aetia* and in Catullus' poem 66.

The catasterism of Berenice's lock stems from a dedication. Berenice II made an oath to the gods to cut her hair on the safe return of her husband Ptolemy III in 245 BCE from the Third Syrian War.³⁵ The dedication was made in the temple of Arsinoë–Aphrodite–Zephyritis, Berenice's predecessor; the lock disappeared, and the astronomer Conon identified a new constellation as the catasterised lock. The shorn lock symbolises Berenice's joy at being reunited with her husband; Poppaea's ascent to the gods reverses this situation, since the apotheosis creates Poppaea's separation from her beloved. Nevertheless, Poppaea assumes that her separation is temporary. At the time of Poppaea's death, Neronian propaganda promoted the emperor as godlike, and his future divinisation seemed ensured. Poppaea's status as a divinity with no share in the joys of the gods aligns her with several details of the catasterism. The separation of the lock from its sister locks, and the rites demanded by the lock, suggest an affinity with Poppaea that leads to several suggestions about Poppaea's cult and her status as an Aphrodite.

In Callimachus' poem, Zephyr carries the lock to the lap of Cypris (Aphrodite) on the orders of the deified Arsinoë–Aphrodite, and Cypris establishes the lock among the stars as a new constellation (Callim. *Aetia* fr. 110.52–8, 64 Pf.). The deified Arsinoë is involved in the process of catasterism, and is able to honour the actions of her descendants, especially Berenice's devotion to her husband. Berenice's lock is portrayed as a maiden that mourns its separation from its sister-locks, a group akin to a maiden chorus (Callim. *Aetia* fr. 110.51 Pf.). The lock is distressed at its eternal separation from Berenice; it reminisces about the perfumes it enjoyed when Berenice was a maiden—perfumes preferable to the myrrh worn by a married woman (Callim. *Aetia* fr. 110.75–8 Pf.). The lock's final words are troubling to the context of a dedication performed on behalf of Berenice's husband: the lock celebrates Berenice's maidenhood as preferable to her married state, during which she wears different perfumes. The maiden status of the lock is central to the rites demanded by the lock in Catullus' version of the catasterism.

³⁵ See Harder (2012) II.793 for bibliographical overview on the lock of Berenice. The dedication aligned Berenice with Isis, who dedicated a lock to her husband Osiris (see Harder (2012) II.798–9).

At the end of his poem on Berenice, Catullus describes a ritual to be completed in honour of the lock (66.79–88). The lock demands libations from women on their wedding nights, and clarifies that only chaste women are to participate in the rite.³⁶ The lock wishes for concordant marriages for these women, and specifies that Berenice herself should participate in the rites as well (66.87–92):

sed magis, o nuptae, semper concordia vestras,
 semper amor sedes incolat assiduus.
 tu vero, regina, tuens cum sidera divam
 placabis festis luminibus Venerem,
 unguinis expertem non siris esse tuam me,
 sed potius largis affice muneribus.

But rather, o wives, may harmony and lasting love always, always inhabit your homes. To be sure, you, queen, when you, looking at the stars, appease the goddess Venus with festal lamps, do not allow that I, your own, am wanting in perfumes, but rather enrich me with great gifts.

This rite has no equivalent passage in Callimachus' *Aetia*, leading scholars to debate whether two versions of Callimachus' poem were in circulation, or whether Catullus invented the ritual.³⁷ Nevertheless, several implications of the ritual further our understanding of the Ptolemaic marital ideal, and its connection to the goddess Aphrodite. In Catullus' poem, the rites are performed by girls who are just married, as well as by loyal wives; these rites contribute to the harmony of the couple, and thus to a stable home. Berenice II is invoked to perform these rites in conjunction with her dedications to her patron goddess, Venus. This goddess is associated with fidelity, chastity, *concordia*, and enduring, married love, ideals similar to those honoured in the

³⁶ See Cheshire (2007) 165 for evidence of the cult of Berenice Euergetis, suggesting that Berenice II became a patron goddess of brides through the Roman period.

³⁷ Putnam (1960) 225–7 suggests that Catullus invented the ritual; on the possibility of two Callimachean versions, see Harder (2012) 799; for earlier discussions see Fraser (1972) II.1006; Pfeiffer (1949–53) *ad loc.* argues that it is unlikely Catullus added lines 79–88 on his own invention; Gutzwiller (1992) 82 ff. agrees, citing similar sacrifices in Ptolemaic ruler cult. Rossi (2000) 311–12 concludes that the verses have a Callimachean heritage and would perfectly integrate into the celebration of Berenice that frames Books 3 and 4 of the *Aetia*. Harder (2012) 847 argues: 'In itself the lines would be very well conceivable in Callimachus, as they contained notions of marital love that would fit 3rd-century BCE court poetry, in which issues of fidelity and Aphrodite as goddess of love between husband and wife were important.'

cult of Arsinoë–Aphrodite; however, she requires appeasement to continue her role as patron goddess for the Ptolemaic queens.³⁸

Similarities between the apotheosis of Poppaea, Berenice I and Arsinoë II, the cult titles of Arsinoë–Aphrodite and Poppaea, and the implications of the rites and divine roles of Berenice I and the lock of Berenice II connect Poppaea to the Ptolemaic queens. Married love is a central aspect of the honours for each woman, as it ensures the lasting nature of ruling dynasties. Aphrodite is the patroness of this love. The image of Poppaea as a Ptolemaic queen may underlie aspects of her literary portrait, but it is hardly prominent. Her connection to the Ptolemies established by the hexameter fragment allows us to see new relevance in details of Poppaea’s funeral, cult, and divinisation, as recorded by Tacitus and Cassius Dio.

3. Poppaea’s Burial and Divinisation

Poppaea’s association with Aphrodite as the goddess of married love, and with the royal Ptolemaic women who provided models of this kind of love, may assist in our understanding of Poppaea’s public image at the end of her life and after her death. Coins and inscriptions attest to her posthumous status as *Diva Poppaea Augusta*, but details of her cult remain a mystery.³⁹ Tacitus provides the most extensive account of Poppaea’s death and burial; Dio records the establishment of her cult. Notable details of each narrative are illuminated by the portrayal of Poppaea in the hexameter poem.

Tacitus’ presentation of Poppaea is critical for interpreting the implications of the empress’ connection to Egyptian royals, and for clarifying the idea of devotion between emperor and empress. Tacitus transmits the same account as Suetonius and Dio, recording the violent manner of Poppaea’s death and the chance rage that caused it. He soundly refutes those who accuse the emperor of poisoning his wife, arguing that this alternate record was invented out of hatred for the emperor rather than a dedication to historical accuracy.⁴⁰ After dismissing the idea of premeditated murder by a

³⁸ Rossi (2000) 304 ff.; cf. Gutzwiller (1992) on the poem expressing a Ptolemaic ideology of equal love.

³⁹ See Champlin (2003) 105 n. 51 for inscriptions and coin issues.

⁴⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 16.6.1: *post finem ludicri Poppaea mortem obiit, fortuita mariti iracundia, a quo gravida ictu calcis adflicta est neque enim venenum crediderim, quamvis quidam scriptores tradant, odio magis quam ex fide: quippe liberorum cupiens et amori uxoris obnoxius erat* (‘After the end of the games Poppaea met her death by the chance fury of her husband, by whom with a blow of the foot she was struck while pregnant, for I am not inclined to believe poison, although some authors (out of hatred more than faithfully) hand down that account: for indeed he was desirous of children and submissive to his love of his wife’). According to

method utilised by Nero elsewhere,⁴¹ he aligns himself with the view that Nero's actions were unintentional. Although Tacitus does not directly contradict the tradition that Nero was responsible for Poppaea's death, he recognises a degree of uncertainty regarding Nero's culpability. He then displays a rare sensitivity, explaining that Nero was 'desirous of children and submissive to his love of his wife' (Tac. *Ann.* 16.6.1). I suggest that this phrase combines two distinct relationships: that of a husband who is focused on the production of his heir, and that of an almost elegiac lover, subject to *amor*.⁴² Furthermore, he records that Nero's devotion to Poppaea lasts well beyond her untimely demise. In his account of the funeral of Poppaea, Tacitus remarks that the empress' body was not cremated, but rather embalmed in the manner of foreign royals. An elaborate funeral procession is held, and Nero gives a eulogy praising Poppaea's beauty and motherhood above all (Tac. *Ann.* 16.6.2):

corpus non igni abolitum, ut Romanus mos, sed regum externorum consuetudine differtum odoribus conditur tumuloque Iuliorum infertur. ductae tamen publicae exsequiae, laudavitque ipse apud rostra formam eius et quod divinae infantis parens fuisset aliaque fortunae munera pro virtutibus.

Her body was not destroyed by fire, as is the Roman way, but in the customary manner of foreign royals was embalmed and carried into the mausoleum of the Julii. Nevertheless a public funeral procession was held, and he [i.e. Nero] himself, on the rostra, praised her beauty and the fact that she was the parent of a divinised infant and other things, gifts of fortune, as though virtues.

Tacitus' account of this remarkable event suggests that Poppaea's last impression was that of a non-Roman elite woman, and that Nero's *laudatio funebris* emphasised his wife's beauty and their divine child instead of traditional Roman feminine virtues. *Pro virtutibus* indicates that Tacitus does not interpret these *munera* in the same way as Nero; rather, he critiques Nero's praise of Poppaea's natural gifts. Tacitus' Roman audience is critical: Poppaea is publicly mourned, but Romans privately rejoice at the death of a

Gerber and Greef (1962) this is the only instance in Tacitus where *cupere* is used of someone being desirous of having children.

⁴¹ E.g., Nero is responsible for the poisoning of Britannicus (Tac. *Ann.* 13.16.1–4).

⁴² Cf. Suet. *Nero* 35.3.

woman characterised by *saevitia* and *impudicitia*.⁴³ Pliny adds to the impression of excessive, foreign luxuries at the event: in explaining the title of *Arabia felix*, Pliny notes that the country does not produce in a whole year the quantity of perfumes burnt by Nero at the funeral of Poppaea (*Nat. Hist.* 12.18.83). Excess and foreignness are the hallmarks of the funeral; the Arabian perfumes confirm that not only the appearance but also the smells contributed to the foreign nature of the spectacle.

Nero's choice to embalm Poppaea, rather than have her cremated in accordance with Roman custom, gives evidence of Nero's obsession with Poppaea's beauty, and expresses his desire to preserve her physical form after death. Embalming was not unheard of at Rome, but the practice was rare.⁴⁴ The idea of embalming as a means to immortality is notably Egyptian.⁴⁵ Literary evidence from the early empire suggests that a father or husband may choose to embalm his wife if he cannot bear the reality of death and the destruction of the physical form through cremation.⁴⁶ Toohey mentions embalming as a possible recourse for a lover faced with permanent separation from his beloved by death.⁴⁷ In Tacitus' *Annals*, Poppaea's embalmed body visually confirms Nero's inability to bear the destruction of his wife's physical form, and suggests that his *amor* of Poppaea lasted beyond the grave.

Nero's love for his wife and her beauty is suggested by several actions during her life, her embalment, Nero's eulogy, and several idiosyncratic practices after Poppaea's death.⁴⁸ Pliny records that Nero wrote a praise poem in honour of Poppaea's amber-coloured hair, and notes the introduction of a new hair dye modelled after her colouring; Dio transmits that Nero had

⁴³ Tac. *Ann.* 16.7.1: *mortem Poppaeae ut palam tristem, ita recordantibus laetam ob impudicitia eius saevitiamque* ('The death of Poppaea, as grievous in public, was however a delight to those recalling her shamelessness and cruelty').

⁴⁴ See Kierdorf (1986) esp. 64–5. Cf. Davies (2004) 181 on Poppaea's cult. Counts (1996) compiles the evidence for embalming in the early empire.

⁴⁵ See Counts (1996) 191 on Dio 50.24, a speech of Octavian to his soldiers prior to the battle of Actium, in which Octavian refers to embalming as an attempt by Egyptians to give themselves the semblance of immortality (*τὰ δὲ σώματα τὰ σφέτερα ἐς δόξαν ἀθανασίας ταριχεύοντες*). Cf. Dio 51.11.5 on Cleopatra's embalming of Antony's body; Dio 51.15.1 on the embalment of Antony and Cleopatra and burial in the same tomb.

⁴⁶ See Counts (1996) for accounts of Romans who embalmed their wives; on embalming as a rare and foreign burial custom in Rome and the surrounding area see Toynbee (1994) 41–2.

⁴⁷ Toohey (2004) 59.

⁴⁸ E.g., Nero had sexual relationships with a woman who resembled Poppaea, and with Sporus (Dio 62.28.2). Champlin (2003) 146 suggests Nero's marriage to Sporus was an expression of his eternal love for Poppaea.

all theatre masks portraying female characters made in Poppaea's image after her death.⁴⁹ Such actions point towards Nero's general obsession with his wife's beauty. Through the method of burial, Nero also drew attention to his growing interest in Egypt and the Hellenistic East.⁵⁰ In specifying the manner of burial, Tacitus refers to a portrait of Poppaea of which very little evidence survives. Tacitus recognises Nero's increased attention to Egyptian practices, which may have been part of the emperor's attempt to portray himself as closer to a king, a new Alexander or a Ptolemy, than to his imperial predecessors.⁵¹ Poppaea's image as a Ptolemaic queen at the time of her death contributes to the presentation of emperor and empress as a royal couple. The papyrus fragment capitalises on this aspect of her public image. Dio adds further relevance to this moment by recording the establishment of her cult.

Dio attests that Poppaea was honoured with a cult site and divine cult upon her death.⁵² Dio includes the dedication of the site as an example of Nero's luxurious practices; significantly, the shrine was dedicated to Poppaea as Sabina Aphrodite and funded by married women (Dio 63.26.3–4):

... καὶ τὸ τῆς Σαβίνης ἡρώων ἐκποιθὲν καὶ κοσμηθὲν λαμπρῶς ὤσίωσεν, ἐπιγράφας αὐτῷ ὅτι Σαβίνη αὐτὸ θεᾶ Ἀφροδίτῃ αἱ γυναῖκες ἐποίησαν. καὶ τοῦτο μὲν ἠλήθευσεν· ἐκ γὰρ τῶν χρημάτων ἃ πολλὰ καὶ παρὰ τῶν γυναικῶν ἐσεσύλητο ἐξεργάσθη.

... after he completed and adorned the shrine of Sabina he dedicated it brilliantly, having inscribed on it that the women had made it for the goddess Sabina Aphrodite. And he was truthful in this; for a great amount of the money from which it was built had been stolen from women.

The shrine to Poppaea has never been found. Nero's inscription involves women in the funding and dedication of the shrine, suggesting his desire to connect Poppaea to Venus Genetrix, the goddess honoured by wives and

⁴⁹ Plin. *N.H.* 37.50; Dio 63.9.5.

⁵⁰ Counts (1996) 195–8.

⁵¹ See Counts (1996) 197 on Nero's 'preoccupation with Ptolemaic Alexandria'.

⁵² For references to the divine Poppaea see Tac. *Ann.* 16.21.2, 16.22.3; see Scheid (1998) no. 30 col. i cd 26–7 for dedications offered by the College of the Arval Brothers for the divine Poppaea and her daughter, the divine Claudia Augusta.

mothers.⁵³ Poppaea's assimilation to Venus is both as a woman of divine beauty and as a mother. As I have suggested, her cult title as Aphrodite aligns her with Arsinoë and other Ptolemaic women connected to the goddess in imagery and cult. The papyrus fragment nuances this passage. Poppaea should be worshiped as a devoted wife and mother, over and above her divine beauty. If indeed Nero stole the money for the shrine, the identification of married women as the group targeted for funds gains new significance when read in conjunction with the papyrus fragment, in which Poppaea's commitment to Nero is hyperbolic, and her divine role is to take care of her children. Her cult, established by married women, seems intended for this group as well, and Poppaea's divine duty may be to protect married love. This responsibility aligns Poppaea with the idea that the leading women of the imperial family should be invoked as Venus Genetrix and as paradigms of *concordia* in marriage. Livia is called upon for this purpose in marriage oaths in Egypt long after her death;⁵⁴ the similar attitude towards Poppaea hinted at by Dio is helpful for a reconsideration of the date and dissemination of the poem.

4. Dating Considerations

Both Tacitus and Dio embed their discussion of the death and posthumous cult of Poppaea within larger observations on the nature of Nero's reign, and the excessive luxuries that characterised the latter part of that reign. The hexameter fragment, on the other hand, celebrates the apotheosis of Poppaea and her love of her godlike husband. The narrative context of the fragment is 65 CE; Schubert, however, dates the papyrus to the second or third century CE. The possible date and occasion of composition of the poem thus range from the time of Poppaea's death to the third century.⁵⁵ An earlier date is appealing, and is arguably the most likely. In considering a date from the period following the death of Poppaea, this section seeks a justification for the celebration of the empress in Alexandria in the first century, and for the dissemination of the poem thereafter. The poem is suitable for an Egyptian context at the end of Nero's reign, perhaps reflecting the emperor's increasing philhellenism and his plans for a journey to Alexan-

⁵³ Kragelund (2010) 567 argues for a specific dedication date as the Kalends of April, the same day as the festival of Venus Verticordia and Fortuna Virilis; this ties Poppaea to a Venus associated with marital health and family life.

⁵⁴ Grether (1946) 242 with references: Livia was invoked through the words ἐπι Ἰουλίας Σεβαστῆς.

⁵⁵ Schubert (2011) 60.

dria. The poem extends the *Nachleben* of the empress centuries after her death; her positive portrait is matched by a similar posthumous depiction of Nero in Egypt.

Although Nero never journeyed to Egypt, he planned trips to Alexandria twice, and evidence suggests that the city was prepared to receive him warmly. His first trip, planned for 64 CE, was aborted due to a bad portent;⁵⁶ Poppaea may have joined him on this venture, but died in 65 CE before another trip could be planned. In the following year, Nero married Statilia Messalina, and embarked on a journey to Greece, from which he would return an athletic and poetic victor in 67 CE. His most likely journey to Alexandria as emperor would have followed this tour of Greece.⁵⁷ Dio records that Nero planned to escape to Alexandria and become a private citizen and professional citharode after losing the favour of Rome.⁵⁸ In an undelivered speech discovered after his death, Nero asked that he be granted the prefecture of Egypt.⁵⁹

Nero's plans to visit or reside in Alexandria create the perception that Nero viewed the city as a place of refuge at the end of his life. Champlin suggests that Nero's idea of the luxury and freedom offered by Egypt was modelled on the image of his ancestor, Antony, and Cleopatra, and on the privileges granted Egypt during his reign.⁶⁰ The city prepared for Nero's arrival, and imagery presents him with Poppaea as a new Apollo with his divine consort.⁶¹ Numerous coins of Alexandria celebrate Nero's artistic achievements in Greece, depicting the emperor as the lyre-playing Apollo, wearing the radiate crown of Apollo/Helios.⁶² Alexandrian coins of 64/65 CE display the crowned Nero, and either Poppaea or Serapis on the obverse.⁶³

⁵⁶ Suet. *Nero* 19.1.

⁵⁷ Tacitus notes that while Nero was planning the trip to Greece, his thoughts were occupied with the desire to journey to the Eastern provinces and Egypt especially (*Ann.* 15.36.1).

⁵⁸ Dio 63.27.2.

⁵⁹ Suet. *Nero* 47.2.

⁶⁰ See Champlin (2003) 173–4. Citing the creation of Nero's Golden House on the model of the royal palace at Alexandria, and the image of Nero as Apollo/Helios as 'derived in part from the solar theology of the ancient pharaohs', Champlin (2003) 174 notes that the 'Egyptomania' under Nero was 'both hellenistic and pharaonic'.

⁶¹ In addition, the imperial prefect of Alexandria had baths built for the emperor (Suet. *Nero* 35.5; Dio 63.18.1). See Griffin (1984) 161 on the baths as most probably built in anticipation of Nero's planned journey to Alexandria after his Greek tour of 66/7 CE.

⁶² Grant (1970) 231.

⁶³ See Christiansen (1988) I.47–51, 60, 67–70, 77, II.100 on the Alexandrian coinage of Nero and Poppaea.

After Poppaea's death, she no longer appears on Alexandrian coinage.⁶⁴ Nero's association with Apollo may complement the presentation of Poppaea as aligned with the moon and moonlit celebrations in the hexameter poem. Although no further evidence of this particular divine connection exists, the Alexandrian coinage presents Nero and Poppaea positively as a ruling couple with close associations to the divine.

Material preparations for Nero in Alexandria anticipated his planned arrival; the hexameter poem celebrating Nero's beloved Poppaea and the imperial example of married love suits an atmosphere of anticipation and celebration at the time of composition. By broadcasting an Egyptianised portrait of Poppaea, the poem celebrates the former empress as worthy of posthumous honours, and reflects Nero's continued devotion after her death. The astrological content of the poem also echoes the interests of Nero and Poppaea during their lifetimes: Poppaea's extensive journey among the stars and celestial bodies suggests an interest in astrology, an interest shared by Poppaea, Nero, and Poppaea's former husband Otho.⁶⁵ The image of Poppaea as aligned with Aphrodite and other divinities is most suitable to the end of her life and immediately following her death. After the death of Nero and the brief reign of Otho, Poppaea's image no longer holds propagandistic weight, and disappears from view.⁶⁶ Other empresses and women of the imperial household serve as the representatives of Aphrodite on earth.⁶⁷

Evidence for the preparation of Nero's arrival in Alexandria towards the end of his reign, as well as images of Poppaea at the end of her lifetime, create a positive context for the celebration of Poppaea in poetry composed between her death and the death of Nero. Even if this context gives a probable date of composition for the hexameter fragment, a justification for the dissemination of the poem in the third century remains elusive. Positive por-

⁶⁴ See Grant (1970) 145 on the portrait of Poppaea and Nero as Augusta and Augustus on Roman coins. Champlin (2003) 143 suggests that the coinage invoked Augustus and Livia as well as Nero and Poppaea.

⁶⁵ See Grant (1970) 148 on Balbillus, court astrologer of Nero and perhaps also the governor of Egypt; see Tac. *Hist.* 1.22.2 on Otho's astrologer, Ptolemaeus.

⁶⁶ E.g., Tacitus refers to Poppaea's statues that are destroyed by the Romans (Tac. *Ann.* 14.61.1; cf. *Octavia* 792–9), and to the senatorial decree under Otho to restore the statues of Poppaea, presumably destroyed after the death of Nero (Tac. *Hist.* 1.78.2).

⁶⁷ See Cheshire (2007) 169–71 on statues of Caligula's sister Drusilla and her cult in Egypt as Diva Drusilla Panthea, and 181–4 on an Egyptianising Aphrodite statue of Faustina the Younger as reflecting the imagery of her coins of the same time period; Cheshire 185 concludes that Aphrodite serves as a protective goddess of the women of Roman Egypt. Poppaea is another Aphrodite figure, whose relevance is constrained to the reign of her husband.

trayals of Poppaea are absent from historical texts written after the death of Nero, and Poppaea disappears from material culture after the reign of Otho. However, widespread evidence of Nero's posthumous memory assists in a possible rationale for the lasting celebration of his beloved wife. Champlin emphasises that Greek writers especially could not completely condemn Nero, the emperor responsible for the liberation of Greece; additionally, portraits of Nero are created through the early fifth century, among which is a cameo depicting the apotheosis of Nero.⁶⁸ Although Nero did not receive divine honours, the image of Nero in the process of becoming a god testifies to the presence of positive posthumous representations of Nero. No visual evidence suggests a similar resurgence of Poppaea.

The lack of material depictions of Poppaea after the death of Otho raises questions about the lasting utility of Poppaea's memory in third-century Egypt; the place of the hexameter fragment within its overall poetic context poses additional difficulties. The narrative of Poppaea's ascent provides a coherent whole, opening with a procession and closing with Poppaea's self-isolation to watch for Nero; however, a switch to the present tense in the final lines of the poem suggests that the fragment is set within a larger poem. The *topos* of a lover mourning the separation from her beloved may provide a model for any couple; perhaps, like Berenice before her, Poppaea is intended to become both a guardian of lovers who have lost, and a divinity that inspires love in others. The idea that a woman's devoted love of her spouse can lead to exceptional posthumous honours is suitable for a poem honouring the death of any noblewoman. Nevertheless, the power of the poetic narrative and its laudatory characterisation of Poppaea would have been strongest for an audience with a living memory of the empress, and of Nero's undying devotion to her.

5. Conclusions

P.Oxy. LXXVII. 5105 constructs an image of Poppaea suited to a period directly following her death and divinisation, but prompts further quandaries about the lasting memory and impact of this empress in Roman Egypt. The poem centres on two features that make her worthy of divinisation: Aphrodite's patronage, and Poppaea's devotion to Nero. The Greek hexameter poem gives evidence for Poppaea's assimilation to Aphrodite during her lifetime, and connects Poppaea to poetry celebrating the Ptolemaic queens and their patron, Aphrodite; this goddess is expressly

⁶⁸ See Champlin (2003) 30–5 on Nero's afterlife in literary and material culture, and 31–3 on the cameo.

identified with married love that contributes to a stable dynastic household. Poppaea's death while pregnant demands pathos, as does her unwillingness to leave Nero without an heir. Poppaea looks after her children among the stars, but can take no pleasure in her divine status until Nero joins her. Such an image of Poppaea is absent from historiography. The poem uniquely presents a Neronian ideology of dynastic continuity that depends on both the production of children and on Poppaea's love. In the hexameter poem, Poppaea is celebrated as worthy of divinisation primarily due to her marital devotion. Poppaea's actions as a divinity, and her rites on earth, both centre on married love. Poppaea provides a model for married women, and her cult worship as Sabina Aphrodite seems intended for this group. Although the shrine to Poppaea is lost, and her cult likely ceased after the death of Nero, the papyrus constructs a Poppaea worthy of such honours. In this singular poem, Poppaea is a Roman empress in Ptolemaic clothing, a mortal beauty and an immortal Aphrodite, a devoted wife who, although she fails as a mother on earth, succeeds among the stars.⁶⁹

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