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**Saving the Life of a Foolish Poet: Marcus Lepidus, Thrasea Paetus and Tacitus on Political Action under the Principate**

In the *Annals* of Tacitus, Marcus Lepidus and Thrasea Paetus are the most prominent senators to display a consistent sense of *libertas*. The courage of the men is demonstrated in two similar trials, in which a poet is charged with *maiestas* for verses threatening to the imperial family. In the first, Marcus Lepidus speaks for clemency on behalf of Clutorius Priscus (3.49-51); in the second, Thrasea Paetus does the same for Antistius Sossianus (14.48-49). This paper will investigate the similarities between the two episodes in the *Annals* and will offer insight into Tacitus' thoughts on proper political behavior under the Principate.

The political importance of the two cases rests on Tacitus' portrayal of the willingness and ability of the two senators to take the risk of saving another's life from the *saevitia* of the senate and *princeps*. Modern scholars have generally considered Lepidus more cautious and moderate than Thrasea, for which he earns Tacitus' greater respect. In contrast, Thrasea is generally considered the object of Tacitus' famous criticism of ostentatious deaths, *sed in nullum rei publicae usum, ambitiosa morte inclaruerunt* (Ag. 42.4). Their behavior in the aforementioned passages indicates that Lepidus and Thrasea notably employed the same tactics. The primary differences between Lepidus and Thrasea were the *principes* under whom they lived. The actions Tacitus most admired were those displaying a degree of *libertas* in service to the state, which Lepidus and Thrasea exemplify.