

# **DOMINANDI AVIDA:**

Tacitus' portrayal of women in the Annals.

by

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## ABSTRACT.

This thesis deals with Tacitus' portrayal of women by examining in detail a number of the female characters in the Annals in order to identify certain themes and ideas relating to women. The most striking theme to emerge from such an examination is that of the strong, powerful, almost masculine woman, and several of the characters examined exemplify this recurring theme. In portraying these characters Tacitus uses certain language patterns and techniques of characterisation, and this thesis is concerned with identifying such patterns and techniques. These include the recurring use of certain words with a specific connotation, and the employment of several methods of directing the reader's perception in the manner Tacitus desires. This manipulation of the reader's response is an example of Tacitus' direct and indirect authorial control, which is also evident in his technique of using his own and other authors' usage to create resonances for particular expressions. Of note is the fact that Tacitus avoids direct description of his characters, but rather allows their actions to reveal character.

Given that Tacitus' main preoccupation in the Annals as a whole is the nature of the principate, he uses his portrayal of women to illuminate and comment upon his view of this form of government. The women chosen for study, with one exception, belong to the imperial circle since, with the inauguration of one man rule, those with ready access to the **princeps** had the most opportunity to break out of the mould of the traditional ideal of Roman womanhood. Boudicca, the British queen of the Iceni, has been chosen for study as a foil to the Roman women in order to highlight their manoeuvrings for personal power, while Octavia has been selected as an exemplar of the Roman ideal of womanhood.

Although this is not a historical or sociological study, it must be noted that the evidence we have of the period about which Tacitus is writing is in fact one-sided

evidence derived from a restricted social class, recorded by men, and an attempt to redress this balance is made by reference to contemporary studies of the legal and social position of women in Roman society. Consequently chapters on the historical background and the position of women respectively have been included as background. In addition other ancient sources have been consulted where this is appropriate in order to determine areas of bias in Tacitus.

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## PREFACE.

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her studies, I can offer only my heartfelt appreciation of their constant encouragement and interest in a subject far from their daily lives. I thank them, too, for innumerable cups of tea which revived my flagging spirits on many a late night in front of the computer. I would also like to acknowledge the debt I owe to my parents who imparted to me an appreciation of education and scholarship during my formative years.

The debt I owe to scholars in the field of Tacitean studies will be obvious from the bibliography. While acknowledging all these contributory influences, the thesis itself is my own work.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations in general follow those of **L'Année Philologique**.

TLL: Thesaurus Linguae Latinae. 1900 - Leipzig: Teubner.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

The bibliography is divided into two lists. List A consists of a list of articles referred to during the research for this thesis, while List B consists of a corresponding list of books consulted.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

**Dominandi avida**<sup>1</sup>: the phrase conjures up a picture of a ruthless, ambitious, power-hungry woman quite at odds with the generally accepted ideal of a submissive, accommodating and completely unaggressive personality. Indeed a woman who is described as **dominandi avida** would appear to have the characteristics of a man rather than those of what is generally termed the weaker sex. Such a woman is unusual, because she does not resemble most of her fellows, and as a result she is an object of interest both to men and to other women, whatever their differing reactions to her. For the modern feminist movement, such figures provide examples of women functioning successfully in a man's world, giving the lie to the myth of feminine weakness and incompetence. The role models of aggressive male and submissive female of Western civilisation have their roots so far back in the pre-history of the peoples of that civilisation that deviations from the norm are always of interest, whether the interest stems from horror or admiration.

In this context, several of the women who appear in Tacitus' Annals are of considerable interest, since they do not adhere to the accepted norms. This is partly a result of changed political circumstances, which afforded certain women opportunities which had not previously been available to exercise power, but it is also partly a function of the personalities of the women themselves, personalities which made them **dominandi avidae**. Of the changed political circumstances Bauman says: "The women of the **Domus Caesarum**, the House of the Caesars, stood apart from the general run of women from senatorial and equestrian families. Socially an Octavia, a Livia or a Julia might have been content to describe herself as **prima inter pares**, but in reality there was the same subtle distinction between her peers and herself as between the emperor and his peers."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 6,25

<sup>2</sup> Bauman 1992:99 (List B)

Before turning to the actual text of the *Annals*, it is necessary to set out the terms of this study, and also to provide some background information about the period concerning which Tacitus was writing, including some discussion about Tacitus' attitude to the principate. In particular, the status or position of women in society at that time will have to be examined before going on to study some of his female characters in detail.

From the outset, I would like to make it clear that this is not a historian's nor a feminist's study of the women I have chosen, or of their period. It is a literary study, based on the relevant portions of Tacitus' *Annals*, and at no stage have I been concerned to prove or disprove Tacitus' accuracy. That has not, however, precluded my reading of other historians' accounts of the same events in order to determine areas of bias or prejudice which have been evident from Tacitus' presentation of certain events or characters, and where this has been relevant I have noted differences in the various accounts.

I have taken as my subject a literary study of some of the female characters in Tacitus' *Annals*. All are members of the imperial circle, with the single exception of Boudicca who is of foreign royal blood, and as such provides an illuminating contrast with the Roman ladies. It is a given, therefore, that I am dealing with women of the elite stratum of society. It must be remembered that most of the literature that has come down to us from ancient society does indeed refer to this group of people, both male and female, with the result that the psychological background that we deduce from their literature consists largely of the outlook and view of the world of this group. There are other sources of information, such as the legal system and archaeological finds, which offset this imbalance, so that a more balanced picture of ancient society can be achieved.

These other sources are particularly important in the case of women, since the ancient literature which has survived to our own era was written almost exclusively by men, and the view of women that we obtain from it is necessarily distorted by being second hand. As Coleman says,

"Faithful character-sketches of Roman women are perhaps never recoverable from the literary sources, written as they are by men who conveyed the assumptions of their age."<sup>3</sup>

As a result, an extraneous source such as the legal system, which deals with all women in society, whatever their status, is useful through its very impartiality, and it will be necessary to examine the legal position of Roman women to obtain some idea of how they were viewed by that society.

I have chosen to deal with some of the women in Tacitus since my interest in women was sparked by writing a dissertation on women in the first three books of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* for my Honours degree. That dissertation is attached to this thesis as an appendix, for comparison and reference where this is relevant. In this thesis I have concentrated upon Tacitus' treatment of women, with some reference to other historians such as Livy, Sallust, Suetonius and Dio Cassius where the comparison is apposite. The terms of reference of this study are essentially literary; in other words, to trace the means Tacitus uses to portray his female characters, and this, in effect, encompasses mainly his use of language in relation to women.

This is not to claim that Tacitus' most interesting characters are women, but rather that, because of the difference in status between men and women in Roman society, his treatment of women reflects the assumptions and expectations of that society concerning women. The interaction between Tacitus' view of women and his use of language as the instrument of expressing that view is the crux of this study.

In the *Annals*, Tacitus is dealing with the period from the death of Augustus to the death of Nero. He does, however, set the scene in the first five chapters of Book 1, with a very short synopsis of Augustus' reign. In recounting the history of this period he is compelled, by the very nature of the material, to deal with the personalities involved in some degree of

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<sup>3</sup> Coleman 1989:198 (List A)

detail, since the nature of the principate made the character of the individual occupying the position of overriding importance. This is one of the results of the change from Republican rule, when the Senate and the consuls made all the important decisions, to the principate, when, despite Augustus' efforts to include the Senate in decision-making, one man actually held supreme power.

This fact in its turn led to an increase in importance of the people who had access to the princeps, his family, his household and his favourites. The change from a collegiate type of government to one centred on one man meant that events were strongly influenced by the personality of the incumbent and his *coterie*, and the historian had to take this into account. As a result, the Annals are full of personalities, good, bad and indifferent, often so well-delineated that they seem to be living, breathing people. One of Tacitus' many gifts is the ability to bring these people to life in his pages, and his women, in particular, are individuals and not stereotypes of their sex. Given the importance of individual personality at this period of history and Tacitus' skill in portraying personality, the methods he uses will indeed repay study.

## CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the *Annals*, Tacitus' field of study, as I have already said, covers the period from the death of Augustus, the first princeps, in AD 14 to the death of Nero, the last princeps of the Julio-Claudian line in AD 68, with a brief survey of Augustus' reign to set the scene. It must be borne in mind that Tacitus came to the writing of history after a distinguished career in the public service as a senator, culminating in the consulship in AD 97 and the governorship of Asia in AD 112. From this it is obvious that Tacitus had first hand knowledge of how the empire was governed, and it can be assumed that he had access to people who could tell him about events before his time. It is worth noting that his father-in-law was Agricola, the Roman general who had had a long and honourable career in the public service, particularly in Britain, and he, no doubt, was able to provide Tacitus with valuable information about that province. All these factors mean that Tacitus was particularly well placed for the writing of history.

One of Tacitus' main preoccupations in his writing of history is the nature of the principate, and consequent upon that, the effects of the character of the holders of the office on the nature of their reigns. As Percival says,

"At the time of his death in AD 14, Augustus had been sole ruler of the Roman world for forty five years; before that there had been Caesar's dictatorship and the Civil War with Pompey, before that still the First Triumvirate, taking us back some thirty years more."<sup>1</sup> This means that for seventy five years before the accession of Tiberius, there had been no Republic and that by then it was in fact a form of government outside the experience of the people of Rome. It therefore belonged in the realm of history, and its influence on people of Tacitus' day probably owed as much to nostalgia and wishful thinking as to a concrete political programme. A man of affairs such as Tacitus had to deal with present reality,

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<sup>1</sup> Percival 1980:122 (List A)

which was a form of government in which power was concentrated in the hands of one man, and he made that form of government, the principate, the object of his study.<sup>2</sup>

In the circumstances outlined above, the character of the man in power was all-important, and although on completion of the Historiae Tacitus originally intended to write about the reigns of Nerva and Trajan<sup>3</sup>, in the event, he turned his attention further back in time to the period preceding AD 69, in an attempt to elucidate the events leading up to that momentous year, **longum et unum annum**<sup>4</sup>. According to ancient historians, history could be explained by the personalities of the men involved in events<sup>5</sup>, and the personality of a man was thought to be fixed and unchanging<sup>6</sup>. This led to a concentration on the characters of the leading players in each situation, as Livy makes plain in his Preface<sup>7</sup>, so as to offer some explanation of cause and effect in events, by examining the characters and deeds of the men in power.

Tacitus began the *Annals* at the death of Augustus in AD 14, and in order to set the scene he gives a brief **résumé** of Augustus' reign, noting his assumption of various powers, but also his skilful winning over of various sections of the populace:

**...militem donis, populum annona, cunctos dulcedine otii pellexit...**<sup>8</sup>

**Pellexit** is a significant word here, with its connotations of seduction and accompanying corruption, and its usage in this context underlines the devious, manipulative side of Augustus' nature, which the stereotypes would suggest is a more feminine characteristic.

**Pellexit** does recur, however, with a masculine subject when Tacitus is recounting the seduction of Poppaea by Otho in Book 13:

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<sup>2</sup> Syme 1958:408 (List B)

<sup>3</sup> **Historiae** 1,1

<sup>4</sup> **Dialogus** 17,4

<sup>5</sup> Walsh 1961:34 (List B)

<sup>6</sup> See Syme 1958:421 (List B). See also Wiedemann 1989:50 (List B)

<sup>7</sup> **Ab Urbe Condita: Praefatio** 9

<sup>8</sup> 1,2

**igitur agentem eam in matrimonio Rufri Crispini equitis Romani, ex quo filium genuerat, Otho pellexit iuventa ac luxu et quia flagratissimus in amicitia Neronis habebatur.**<sup>9</sup>

In both instances the male subjects of the verb **pellexit** seduce those from whom they hope to gain something with enticements calculated to ensure their co-operation. The use of **pellexit**, therefore, in connection with Augustus is the first inkling Tacitus gives of his attitude to Augustus' manoeuvrings.

In the forty-five years since the battle of Actium, Augustus had provided the people of the Roman world with a peace which had been lacking for many years, and for which most were prepared to forego total freedom. As Tacitus says

**...ceteri nobilium, quanto quis servitio promptior, opibus et honoribus extollerentur ac novis ex rebus aucti tuta et praesentia quam vetera et periculosa mallent.**<sup>10</sup>

The mention of **servitium** in this quotation gives a further pointer towards Tacitus' own feeling about the new state of affairs and it is a word that he returns to often in the course of the *Annals*<sup>11</sup>, as he charts what he considers to be the decline of the Roman people. As yet, however, he merely notes the difficulties of making people realise what is actually happening, when all seems to be well:

**domi res tranquillae, eadem magistratum vocabula; iuniores post Actiacam victoriam, etiam senes plerique inter bella civium nati: quotus quisque reliquus qui rem publicam vidisset?**<sup>12</sup>

The use here of the word **vocabulum** is interesting, since Tacitus is a man exceptionally sensitive to the use and influence of words, so that he is aware that words can be used to mask the true state of affairs. Merely using the same language of government does not necessarily mean that the institutions themselves are the same. As a man of affairs,

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<sup>9</sup> 13,45

<sup>10</sup> 1,2

<sup>11</sup> For example 12,7 in connection with Agrippina; 1,7 in connection with the submission of the consuls, senators and knights to Augustus, and as a contrast, 14,31, in connection with the Britons who were **not** yet broken to slavery.

<sup>12</sup> 1,4

however, he realises that the Republic is no longer even a fond memory, and cannot easily be used as a rallying cry in opposition to the regime instituted by Augustus.

This is the nub of the matter. While Augustus is in power, the situation can be tolerated, given the advantages his rule has brought, and his consummate skill in diplomacy, but he cannot last forever<sup>13</sup>:

**...nulla in praesens formidine, dum Augustus aetate validus seque et domum et pacem sustentavit. postquam provecta iam senectus aegro et corpore fatigabatur aderatque finis et spes novae...**<sup>14</sup>

Tacitus' subject is the tracing of events following the death of Augustus in order to show how the principate, or one man rule, because of its dependence on the integrity of the incumbent, led inexorably to the **servitium** of the Roman people under the despotism of less able **principes** than Augustus. Syme recognises the essential dichotomy in Tacitus' attitude to the principate; the senator's hankering after the days of the Republic when the Senate held real power in the government of Rome, and the realism of a man who has served in government under the principate and who realises that the old order is gone forever.

"At first sight and on the surface he is hostile to the monarchy. Not only bitter against the Caesars, but mocking the Principate for its inner falsity and perpetual contrast between promise and performance. One layer deeper, and something different is disclosed. For peace and stability, the rule of one man cannot be avoided. Hence acceptance of the monarchy, from pessimism or despair, from the lessons of experience and the logic of events."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Walker 1968:164-165 (List B)

<sup>14</sup> 1,4

<sup>15</sup> Syme 1958:547 (List B)

Percival puts it in a nutshell. "...he was not against the Principate, but against bad **principes**."<sup>16</sup> In his study of the Principate following the death of Augustus Tacitus found ample evidence of bad **principes**, though it must be said that his portrait of Tiberius, which looms so large in his work, is not accepted by modern authorities as completely fair. As Walker puts it:

"...Tacitus evolved a poetic conception which would not allow him to consider rationally the facts about Tiberius' reign..."<sup>17</sup>

In fact, Walker says later that

"To explain Tiberius, Tacitus was forced to assume a hypocrisy which was its own **raison d'être**. The other evil characters in the **Annals** are all aiming at something comprehensible, and their hypocrisy develops normally from their other qualities - as a means only. Tiberius, alone among them, is not dominated by megalomania; he is singularly free even from the milder forms of greed and vanity. To explain "ars Tiberii" one must presuppose an "odium generis humani" like that attributed to the Christians, or a "motiveless malignity" like that attributed by Bradley to Iago. Such a personality is perhaps not impossible; but as a description of the historical Tiberius it can hardly be supported."<sup>18</sup>

In order to offset the gloomy picture that Tacitus paints of Tiberius it is instructive to read the Tiberian portion of the work of Velleius Paterculus, who can perhaps be accused of sinning in the opposite direction because of his uncritical and laudatory portrayal of Tiberius. An example will suffice to underline the contrast with Tacitus' narrative.

**honor dignis paratissimus, poena in malos sera, sed aliqua: superatur aequitate gratia, ambitio virtute; nam facere recte civis suos princeps optimus faciendo docet, cumque sit imperio maximus, exemplo maior est.**<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Percival 1980:124 (List A)

<sup>17</sup> Walker 1968:162 (List B)

<sup>18</sup> Walker 1968:239 (List B)

<sup>19</sup> **Historiae Romanae** 126,4

It should be noted that Velleius Paterculus not only lived at the time of Tiberius, but actually served under him, first as prefect of horse and then as **legatus**, for eight consecutive years during his military campaigns. It is also worth noting that Paterculus was a member of the equestrian order, and therefore did not suffer from the bitterness felt by the senatorial order at being shorn of its powers by the principate.

Nevertheless, leaving aside the controversial portrait of Tiberius, there was ample evidence in the subsequent rulers, Gaius, Claudius and Nero, for Tacitus to feel justifiably wary of the absolute power of the **princeps**. This absolute power enhanced the importance of those who had the ear of the emperor, and these included the female members of his family, the mothers, sisters, wives and even mistresses of the various **principes**. As a result these women were far more powerful than Roman women were customarily supposed to be according to the norms of Roman society. Tacitus found plenty of material for his gallery of powerful and influential women in his subject matter, and these portraits make up some of the most interesting parts of his work. It is the subject of this study to examine how he set about depicting them, mainly through his use of language. First of all, however, it is necessary to investigate the position and status of women in Roman society in order to demonstrate the ways in which Tacitus' characters conformed to or diverged from the norm.

CHAPTER 3: THE POSITION AND STATUS OF WOMEN  
IN ROMAN SOCIETY.

The study of Tacitus' female characters is a fascinating one, not least because of the discrepancy between the ideal of the Roman woman which was part of the society's psychological heritage, and the characters that Tacitus found in his material, the majority of whom did not conform to this ideal<sup>1</sup>. The view that early Roman society held concerning women was expressed in the Twelve Tables (traditionally dated to 451-450 BC); in other words, the ideal Roman woman would be able to function under the constraints laid down in the legal system as formulated in that code. One of the most significant features of Roman law as laid down there was the **patria potestas**, which was the power that the **paterfamilias**, or head of the family, had over his family. This system had few parallels in other societies<sup>2</sup>, and differed from the Greek system of guardianship of the father, which ended when the child came of age<sup>3</sup>. The early Roman legal system saw a girl as the possession or chattel of a man, originally her father, who exercised his **patria potestas** over her, and then as passing on into the **potestas** of her husband if she married **cum manu**. In this situation, the woman had no legal capacity whatsoever, and was regarded as being in the same relation to her husband as her children. If she married **sine manu**, she remained under the **potestas** of her father until his death, whereupon a legal guardian was chosen for her from among her male relatives<sup>26</sup>. This is in direct contrast to a son, who became **sui iuris**, or independent, on the death of his father<sup>4</sup>, and if he thereby became the oldest surviving male of the family, he became the **paterfamilias** in his turn<sup>5</sup>.

The patriarchal society of Rome was originally based on "relationship through the male line, **agnatio**, and the unlimited power of the **pater familias**."<sup>6</sup> The Roman woman was

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<sup>1</sup> Pomeroy 1975:149 (List B)

<sup>2</sup> Treggiari 1991:15 (List B)

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas 1962:66 (List B)

<sup>26</sup> Rawson 1986:62 (List B)

<sup>4</sup> Treggiari 1991:15 (List B)

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas 1962:66 (List B)

<sup>6</sup> Carcopino 1941:89 (List B)

seen primarily as the mistress of her household, concerned with her domestic duties such as spinning and the rearing of children, but in the early days the world of business was closed to her. Although this changed later, when she was able to own and dispose of her own property<sup>7</sup>, the world of politics was never formally opened to her either. Nor was the right of a mother to inherit from a son who died intestate recognised under the code of the Twelve Tables<sup>8</sup>. This shows how little legal weight was given to the relationship between mother and child, thereby minimising the importance of the woman's role. There is an interesting corollary to this insistence on descent through the male line, however, and this is the fact that it places a great importance on the chastity and fidelity of the Roman wife<sup>9</sup>. Since paternity, particularly in ancient times, is not capable of proof, the Roman husband was totally dependent on his wife's morals for the legitimacy of his children. Whether this led to the idealised conception of the Roman matron, chaste, upright, mistress in her own home, but not taking any part in public affairs, or whether she had no opportunity to be anything else because of the legal restraints on her is a moot point, but it did give her an importance in Roman society, perhaps mostly understood and unspoken, since her behaviour had a great influence on the reputation and standing of the family.

There are in the Roman historians many examples of the ideal Roman woman in several of her incarnations; perhaps the most obvious are those found in the first three books of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*. Lucretia<sup>10</sup> is the most outstanding example and even though it may be argued that she is merely a stereotype, and not a true historical figure, she does embody the female virtues that were most valued in Roman society. According to Clark<sup>11</sup>, "In Latin *lanificium*, 'woolwork', is the mark of the virtuous wife and mother, provident and homeloving." Therefore when Collatinus and his friends visit Lucretia unexpectedly in order to discover whose wife is the most virtuous and find her busy at her loom,

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<sup>7</sup> Rawson 1986:19 (List B)

<sup>8</sup> Dixon 1988:45 (List B)

<sup>9</sup> Treggiari 1991:379 (List B)

<sup>10</sup> *Ab urbe condita* 1,57 et seqq.

<sup>11</sup> Clark 1989:12 (List B)

**...nocte sera deditam lanae inter lucubrantes ancillas in medio aedium sedentem...**<sup>12</sup>,  
 this scene epitomises many of the virtues most valued in the Roman matron<sup>13</sup>.

Livy uses Lucretia as an exemplar of many of these virtues by highlighting them in his depiction of her; she is chaste, honourable, hospitable, of sober habits and hardworking in the service of her family. It is significant that Tarquin cannot overcome Lucretia with the threat of death alone, but is successful when he threatens her with dishonour. She also shows great courage by summoning her father and her husband and demanding that they should avenge the wrong done to her. Once this is done, she kills herself so that no one may use her as an example to avoid death after dishonour. Livy's Lucretia is the epitome of the ideal Roman matron but we also find in the **Ab urbe condita** the young girl Cloelia as an example of female courage and Veturia as a model of the older Roman woman, the mother who puts patriotism before familial ties<sup>14</sup>.

There is a further example of an honourable and noble woman in Pliny's correspondence. In writing to Metilius Nepos, Pliny gives several lesser known good deeds of Arria, a noblewoman in the reign of Claudius, who became celebrated as an example of nobility and fortitude. She was best known for her action in plunging a sword into her breast, removing it and handing it to her husband with the words, "**Paete, non dolet,**" when he was about to commit suicide. Pliny recounts three lesser known anecdotes testifying to the fact that her courage on the occasion of Paetus' suicide was of a piece with the rest of her life. Pliny ends with the comment:

**unde colligitur, quod initio dixi, alia esse clariora, alia maiora.**<sup>15</sup>

It is against this moral and legal background that we approach the women in the Annals of Tacitus. Since no society is ever static, and the legal system generally follows rather than

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<sup>12</sup> **Ab urbe condita** 1,57,9

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix for fuller discussion of these characters.

<sup>15</sup> Pliny, **Epistulae** 3,16

leads the customs of any society, by the late Republic reality had changed since the days when the Twelve Tables were laid down.

During the period prior to Augustus' assumption of power, marriage had generally come to be of the **sine manu** type<sup>16</sup>, which meant that wives did not fall under the **potestas** of their husbands, but remained in the **potestas** of their fathers or guardians. Over the same period, divorce had become commonplace, along with frequent remarriage. Since marriage was dependent on the free consent of both parties<sup>17</sup>, divorce could also be instituted by either party, if the marriage was **sine manu**, and this gave the woman an equal right with a man to end a marriage<sup>18</sup>. This situation, combined with a falling birth rate, made Augustus attempt to encourage fruitful marriages through legislation<sup>19</sup>, in terms of which he awarded the parents of larger numbers of children certain rights under the law.

Augustus also allowed the woman to reclaim her dowry upon divorce, since this was a decisive factor in her being able to make another marriage, and thereby having the chance of bearing further children. This meant that husbands of wealthy wives could not divorce their wives without having to consider the question of repayment of the dowry. The wealthy wife, whose wealth gave her a hold over her husband because he could not afford to divorce her and repay her dowry, became a stock figure in Roman literature<sup>20</sup>, and presumably in society as well. Since a woman married **sine manu** administered her own property, and could divorce her husband just as easily as he could divorce her, the Roman woman of Tacitus' time was a far cry from the legal chattel found in the Twelve Tables. It cannot come as a surprise, therefore, to meet independent, powerful women in the pages of Tacitus. He was writing about the men and women of the imperial court, and they were the ones who were able to take advantage of the legislation of Augustus. It is perhaps

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<sup>16</sup> Treggiari 1991:35 (List B)

<sup>17</sup> Treggiari 1991:170 (List B)

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas 1962:85 (List B)

<sup>19</sup> Rawson 1986:9 (List B)

<sup>20</sup> Treggiari 1991:210 (List B) and Rawson 1986:19 (List B)

only surprising that the ideal of the Roman woman lived on so long in people's minds, when the reality, for the elite at any rate, could be very different.

Tacitus himself held many of the traditional Roman beliefs about society, and hence the position of women in it, but he could not ignore the reality that he found both in his material and in society in general. The ideal of Roman womanhood, epitomised by Livy's Lucretia, and given legal form by the Twelve Tables, still held its attractions for him, but he found very few examples of the ideal in his material. Not only that, but those whom he did find were far less interesting characters than the non-conformists who lent themselves much more readily to the compelling and dramatic narrative at which he excelled. Octavia, the wife of Nero, is a case in point. She perhaps comes closest to the ideal of Roman womanhood, but it is significant that Tacitus chooses not to build her up as a character. Poppaea, her rival, on the other hand, receives much fuller treatment. This will be discussed later in the body of the thesis<sup>21</sup>.

This dichotomy led to what Pomeroy calls "the tension between the ideal and the real Roman matron..."<sup>22</sup>, between what ought to be in Tacitus' ideal, patriarchal, society and what he found in reality. Since one of Tacitus' many gifts is to create vivid, compelling personalities for his narrative, it is interesting to realise that he found it more rewarding to create bad or evil characters than good ones. This may be because goodness is often boring, or because he found a multiplicity of bad characters in his material. In addition, it seems safe to assume that he knew his readers would find more interesting the exploits of characters who paid no heed to the norms of human behaviour which inhibit most of humanity from terrible deeds.

It is also possible that Tacitus' own experience under Domitian was responsible for his pessimistic view of human nature.<sup>23</sup> Whatever his motives, it must be said that in choosing

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<sup>21</sup> See chapters 11 and 12.

<sup>22</sup> Pomeroy 1975:149 (List B)

<sup>23</sup> Walker 1968:182 (List B)

to write an account of Rome from Augustus onward, Tacitus found in the material an ample source of characters who had gone beyond the bounds of generally acceptable human behaviour. He did not have to invent them, although it must be borne in mind that he may have embroidered them. This abundance was particularly striking in the case of women, since legally their lives were more circumscribed than those of men, and it was therefore all the more shocking when they disregarded the conventions applicable not only to women but to society as a whole.

As a consequence, it is interesting to take account of just how many powerful and independent women appear in the pages of the *Annals*, and the importance that Tacitus gives to them. Livia, the two Agrippinas, Messalina, Poppaea Sabina and even Boudicca spring to mind immediately, since each participates significantly in the history that Tacitus is reporting. Since the history concerns the Roman empire and its government, these women play a role in a sphere beyond the normal domain of action of Roman women, namely the family, and their actions have repercussions at far more than just a familial level. For example, Rutland sees the succession process of the empire as "a game controlled by the females of the imperial family..... A choice which would ideally be left to the Senate or, perhaps, the Roman people, or the Princeps acting on his best judgement, was now made on the basis of schemes and tricks by the imperial mothers."<sup>24</sup>

To the imperial mothers can be added the imperial wives, Messalina and Poppaea Sabina, who scheme to fulfil their own desires. Agrippina the elder is not so much a schemer as a victim of her position; as the widow of Germanicus and mother of his children, she has political importance whether she wants it or not, and her sufferings flow from this. Boudicca is a contrast to the imperial women, both because she is not Roman and because she is direct and uncomplicated in her actions. She has a valid grievance and acts on it. In the event she is unsuccessful, but there is no doubt that Tacitus admires her courage and

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<sup>24</sup> Rutland 1978-79:15 (List A)

resourcefulness which provide him with a useful foil for the machinations of the Roman women he portrays<sup>25</sup>.

It is obvious, therefore, that women play a large role in the *Annals* and this study will attempt to illustrate some of the narrative techniques Tacitus uses to portray his female characters, and to show how he uses language to elicit the response he sought from his readers. Various narrative techniques and word usages recur in the sections dealing with different women, and in tracing them it can be seen how Tacitus makes use of echoes and reverberations to expand the effect beyond the words on the page.

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<sup>25</sup> See Walker 1968:225 et seqq (List B) for the concept of the Noble Savage, contrasted by Tacitus with the corrupt and degraded society of civilised Rome.

CHAPTER 4: SOME TECHNIQUES AND LANGUAGE PATTERNS  
IN THE CHARACTERISATION OF WOMEN.

In this chapter I will make some general observations about Tacitus' treatment of women, and then go on to examine his use of certain words in relation to women, and to certain characters in particular. Perhaps the most striking feature of Tacitus' characterisation of women is the fact that he uses very little direct description, particularly physical description, but rather allows his characters to reveal themselves through their actions.<sup>1</sup> Where other authors enliven their narrative with physical description, Tacitus seldom does and if he does, it is only in the most general terms. On various occasions he comments on the beauty of a particular female character, but he does not go on to describe the woman in question. At this point it may be instructive to note the Roman custom of parading images of distinguished ancestors at the funerals of notable personages.<sup>2</sup> Polybius says:

μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα θάψαντες καὶ ποιήσαντες τὰ νομιζόμενα τιθέασι τὴν εἰκόνα τοῦ μεταλλάξαντος εἰς τὸν ἐπιφανέστατον τόπον τῆς οἰκίας, ξύλινα καὶ ἰδία περιτιθέντες. ἢ δ' εἰκῶν ἐστὶ πρόσωπον εἰς ὁμοιότητα διαφερόντως ἐξεργασμένον καὶ κατὰ τὴν πλάσιν καὶ κατὰ τὴν ὑπογραφήν. ταύτας δὲ τὰς εἰκόνας ἐν τε ταῖς δημοτελέσι θυσίαις ἀνοίγοντες κοσμοῦσι φιλοτίμως, ἐπὶ τὴν οἰκείων μεταλλάξῃ τις ἐπιφανῆς, ἄγουσιν εἰς τὴν ἐκφορὰν, περιτιθέντες ὡς ὁμοιοτάτοις εἶναι δοκοῦσι κατὰ τε τὸ μέγεθος καὶ τὴν ἄλλην περικοπήν.<sup>3</sup>

From this it is evident that detailed likenesses of family members were customarily kept<sup>3</sup>, and bearing in mind that in the case of the imperial family there would also have been likenesses in the form of statues, busts and coins, it becomes clear that Tacitus' decision to omit anything other than the most general physical description is a conscious one.

<sup>1</sup> Walker B. 1968:190 (List B)

<sup>2</sup> Walker S. 1985:11 (List B)

<sup>3</sup> Polybius 6,53,4 - 6,53,6.

<sup>3</sup> Rawson 1986:41 (List B)

By contrast, Dio Cassius includes a physical description of Boudicca in his account of the rebellion of the Iceni, remarking on her height and her red hair.

ἦν δὲ καὶ τὸ σῶμα μεγίστη καὶ τὸ εἶδος βλοσυρωτάτη τὸ τε βλέμμα δριμυτάτη, καὶ τὲ φθέγμα τραχὺ εἶχε, τὴν τε κόμην πλείστην τε καὶ ξανθοτάτην οὖσαν μέχρι τῶν γλουτῶν καθεῖτο, καὶ στρεπτὸν μέγαν χρυσοῦν ἐφόρει, χιτῶνά τε παμποίκιλον ἐνεκεκόλπωτο, καὶ χλαμύδα ἐπ' αὐτῷ παχεῖαν ἐνεπεπόρητο. οὕτω μὲν αἰεὶ ἐνεσκευάζετο· τότε δὲ καὶ λόγχην λαβοῦσα, ὥστε καὶ ἐκ τούτου πάντας ἐκπλήττειν, ... <sup>4</sup>

This description may be culled from the generally accepted idea of the appearance of a Celtic woman or may indeed be fictitious; all we can say with certainty is that Dio used some source other than Tacitus for it, because Tacitus does not comment in any way on Boudicca's appearance.

Taking another author as a comparison, it is instructive to read Sallust's remarks concerning Sempronia in the *de coniuratione Catilinae*, 25.

**sed in eis erat Sempronia, quae multa saepe virilis audaciae facinora commiserat. Haec mulier genere atque forma, praeterea viro, liberis satis fortunata fuit; litteris Graecis et Latinis docta, psallere saltare elegantius, quam necesse est probae, multa alia, quae instrumenta luxuriae sunt. Sed ei cariora semper omnia quam decus atque pudicitia fuit; pecuniae an fama minus parceret, haud facile discerneres. Sed ea saepe antehac fidem prodiderat, creditum abiuraverat, caedis conscia fuerat, luxuria atque inopia praeceps abierat. verum ingenium eius haud absurdum: posse versus facere, iocum movere, sermone uti vel modesto vel molli vel procaci; prorsus multae facetiae multusque lepos inerat.**

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<sup>4</sup> Dio Cassius, 62,2,3

Such a full and rounded description of a character does not often appear in Tacitus, and it may be said, with some justification, that such a sketch is more in the style of the biographer than the historian. Tacitus' technique is not to describe directly, as author, but rather to allow the characters to develop and reveal themselves through their actions. In the sections of the Annals dealing with Agrippina and Messalina, there are some instances of description, but they are scattered throughout the narrative rather than given in one comprehensive overview. The observations that he does make are revealed within the narrative when the attributes of the character are germane to what is taking place. For example, when the freedmen are putting forward candidates for a wife for Claudius after Messalina's death, in a contest which resembles a "judgement of Paris"<sup>6</sup>, Tacitus lists only those of her attributes which underline her suitability for the match:

**at Pallas id maxime in Agrippina laudare quod Germanici nepotem secum traheret, dignum prorsus imperatoria fortuna stirpem nobilem et familiae Iuliae Claudiaequae posteros coniungeret, ne femina expertae fecunditatis, integra iuventa, claritudinem Caesarum aliam in domum ferret.**<sup>5</sup>

This is not characterisation, this is politics, where people vie for position, using attributes such as lineage and proven fertility to strengthen their case. Immediately thereafter, however, Tacitus allows us to glimpse something of Agrippina's character when he says

**Praevaluere haec adiuta Agrippinae inlecebris.**<sup>6</sup>

Here, it would seem, is a woman who does not shrink from using her physical charms to obtain her goal, that of being wife to the Emperor. He elaborates further:

**ad eum per speciem necessitudinis crebro ventitando pellicit patrum ut praelata ceteris et nondum uxor potentia uxoria iam uteretur.**<sup>7</sup>

This is a good example of the technique referred to above. Instead of describing Agrippina as beautiful, as Sallust does with Sempronia, Tacitus not only manages to apprise the reader of this fact, but also conveys the additional idea that she is not above using her

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<sup>6</sup> Syme 1981:43 (List A)

<sup>5</sup> 12,2

<sup>6</sup> 12,3

<sup>7</sup> 12,3

attractiveness for her own ends, further illustrating her intelligence and ability to plan a path towards her goal. In this way, he prefers to allow her actions to reveal her character.

Occasionally the character delineation is direct, and even more telling when Tacitus employs a comparison to make his point. The following comparison between Messalina and Agrippina points up the differences between two women, who are nonetheless alike in their ruthless ambition.

**versa ex eo civitas et cuncta feminae oboediebant, non per lasciviam, ut Messalina, rebus Romanis inludenti. adductum et quasi virile servitium:...**<sup>8</sup>

In a few words Tacitus is able to show the essential difference between the two women; Agrippina is after political power, partly for herself and partly for her son, whereas Messalina is a wanton, motivated by *lascivia*, the pursuit of pleasure. In describing the power that Agrippina wields as **quasi virile servitium**, Tacitus reveals his Roman thought patterns. Political power in Rome is a male domain, and by wanting to wield that power Agrippina is showing masculine characteristics, hence the use of *virile*. Messalina, driven by *lascivia*, is in Tacitus' mind more conventionally female. The idea of political obedience being accorded to a woman is for him a chilling idea, and he returns to it frequently when writing about Agrippina and the manner in which she overturns the conventions of Roman society by aspiring to political power.

A further example occurs when Tacitus describes the pardoning of Caratacus by Claudius.

**atque illi vinclis absoluti Agrippinam quoque, haud procul alio suggestu conspicuam, isdem quibus principem laudibus gratibusque venerati sunt. novum sane et moribus veterum insolitum, feminam signis Romanis praesidere: ipsa semet parti a maioribus suis imperii sociam ferebat.** <sup>9</sup>

With the emotive words **moribus veterum insolitum**, Tacitus manages to convey his abhorrence of Agrippina's behaviour. **Moribus veterum** for Tacitus himself and his male

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<sup>8</sup> 12,7

<sup>9</sup> 12,37

audience would have immense psychological reverberations, conjuring up all the most deeply held beliefs of the Roman senator about society. For a woman to dare to place herself publicly in a position reserved for men ran counter to everything a Roman believed in. In this way, Tacitus shows how Agrippina is not a normal Roman woman, not by merely describing her as ambitious and arrogant, although he does that, but by illustrating the scale of her ambition in her actions. She would know exactly the effect her action would have on Roman men, and what it would mean in terms of the conventions of their society for a woman to sit before the standards, the ultimate symbol of a male dominated society. In the words **moribus veterum insolitum** Tacitus encapsulates his horror at the political ambitions of women.

There is one occasion when Tacitus allows himself a brief, although still not a physical, description of Agrippina, and this is when he wants to illustrate the enmity between Agrippina and Domitia Lepida, the mother of Messalina, whom he had earlier depicted urging her daughter in vain to die nobly<sup>10</sup>. Tacitus describes the rivalry between the women, and points out that they were equally well favoured by birth and position. Agrippina destroys Domitia Lepida for what Tacitus calls **muliebribus causis**, feminine jealousy. He goes on to say,

**et utraque impudica, infamis, violenta, haud minus vitiis aemulabantur quam si qua ex fortuna prospera acceperant.**<sup>11</sup>

This list of adjectives describing the two women directly is not Tacitus' usual way of drawing his characters, and is the more striking for that. **Impudica** and **infamis** both describe the women in a negative way, in the sense of being without shame and without reputation, and the only positive adjective of the three is one which does not sit well with the ideal of the dignity of the Roman matron.

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<sup>10</sup> 11,37

<sup>11</sup> 12,64

When reading the accounts Tacitus gives of Messalina and Agrippina in particular, one is struck by the frequent use of words for crime: **scelus**, **facinus**, **flagitium**, **crimen**, and related ideas such as **corruptio**, **stuprum**, **infamia**, **dedecus**, **libido**, **lascivia**, **vitium**, **avaritia**, and **licentia**. Lewis and Short give **scelus**, **facinus**, **flagitium** and **crimen** as synonyms, but also say that **scelus** is "the strongest general term for a morally bad act or quality". These words recur throughout the accounts of the two women, though it is interesting to note that **scelus** is employed most often in connection with Agrippina, while **flagitium** predominates in the sections dealing with Messalina. In Lewis and Short **flagitium**<sup>12</sup> is defined as "a shameful or disgraceful act done in the heat of passion", and this would seem to underline Tacitus' different perceptions of the two women. Messalina is driven by her emotions and the pursuit of pleasure, so that we find words such as **libidines**<sup>13</sup>, **flagitium**<sup>14</sup> and **lascivia**<sup>15</sup> used far more in connection with Messalina than with Agrippina.

Agrippina, as I have already noted, is motivated by a desire for political power, even if it has to be exercised through her son. Consequently, she is a more calculating character than Messalina and displays what might be called more masculine characteristics. It is not surprising, then, that Tacitus uses the word **scelus** to describe her misdeeds, since it does not have the same connotations of passion and emotion that **flagitium** has. By this choice, Tacitus is able to convey the idea that Agrippina plans her crimes in cold blood, always bearing her ultimate goal in mind, seldom acting merely in the heat of the moment. A good example of this occurs very early on in the account of Agrippina:

**nam ubi sui matrimonia certa fuit, struere maiora nuptiasque Domitii, quem ex Cn. Ahenobarbo genuerat, et Octaviae Caesaris filiae moliri; quod sine scelere perpetrari non poterat..**<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> L&S s.v. **flagitium**, II, A.

<sup>13</sup> 11,26; 11,34; 11,37

<sup>14</sup> 11,25; 11,32; 11,34

<sup>15</sup> 11,36; 12,7

<sup>16</sup> 12,3

The choice of **scelus** to describe the defaming of an innocent relationship between Silanus and his sister, in order to remove him as an obstacle to the marriage of Nero and Octavia, points up the difference in nature between Messalina and Agrippina. No sooner was Agrippina certain of her position than she began to commit crimes in order to achieve her goal of furthering her son's position.

Messalina, on the other hand, seeks only sensation and pleasure, and commits her misdeeds far more recklessly. When she weighs up the pros and cons of marrying Silius, Tacitus does not use the word **scelus**, but rather **infamia**, for what she does.

**nomen tamen matrimonii concupivit ob magnitudinem infamiae, cuius apud prodigos novissima voluptas est.**<sup>17</sup>

Messalina is essentially a seeker after thrills, being totally self-absorbed, and although she resorts to crimes just as heinous as those of Agrippina, up to and including murder, Tacitus appears to regard her motivation in a different light from that of Agrippina and signals this through his choice of language to describe her crimes. **Scelus** denotes the calculated nature of Agrippina's crimes, whereas **lascivia** highlights the more impetuous, self-indulgent quality of Messalina's.

It is also interesting to analyse Tacitus' use of the two Latin words for woman, **femina** and **mulier**, in his accounts of his female characters. In the accounts concerning Messalina, Agrippina and Boudicca, he uses **femina** twice as often as he uses **mulier**, in a ratio of 22:10<sup>18</sup>. It is significant that he uses **mulier** and its associated adjectives and diminutives when his purpose is derogatory; for instance, he uses the diminutive **muliercula** twice in connection with the slavegirl Acte, presumably to emphasise her low standing: **muliercula nulla**<sup>19</sup>. He also uses the adverb **muliebriter** to describe Agrippina's reaction to having a

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<sup>17</sup> 11,26

<sup>18</sup> Established by computerised word search using Packard Humanities Institute CD ROM #5.3 1991.

<sup>19</sup> 13,12

slave girl as a rival for her son's affections<sup>20</sup>. It seems to be his word of choice when he is dealing with Agrippina's less desirable attributes; for example, he describes Agrippina as **mulieris semper atrocis, tum et falsae** <sup>21</sup> and later on he says **...et ministros temptare arduum videbatur mulieris usu scelerum adversus insidias intentae;...** <sup>22</sup> The use of **mulier** and **scelus** in the same sentence leaves no doubt about the general condemnatory tone of Tacitus' remark.

At this point it is interesting to note what I found in the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae under the entries for **mulier**, **muliebris**, and **femina**. Taking **mulier** first, it is found in the legal authors from the time of the Twelve Tables until the Codex of Justinian, a very long period of use. It is also widely used by the comic writers, for example, Plautus and Terence. It occurs in the works of Varro and Columella, the writers on agriculture. It is found in biographical contexts in Sallust and Suetonius, and it is found also in Petronius. It is not found in the poets, other than one instance cited in Horace<sup>23</sup>, and it is not found in Vergil. Since Tacitus often uses words also used by Vergil, this is an interesting observation. Syme comments on Tacitus' use of Vergil in this way.

"The historian Tacitus makes use of poetical language. Much of it comes from his predecessors in prose. For the rest, Lucan is hardly ever the source, but Virgil, whom they both admired."<sup>24</sup>

It is very seldom used by Cicero, except in his letters, and there is only one instance cited in Livy, when he describes Tanaquil as **mulier peregrina**.(1,47,6)

Section II of the TLL entry on **muliebris**<sup>25</sup> translates as "concerning women, namely what women are accustomed to do, suffer, own, cling to, celebrate, often with a notion of vice or weakness." The word is also often used as a term of detraction with reference to men who

<sup>20</sup> 13,13: **Sed Agrippina libertam aemulam, nurum ancillam aliaque eundem in modum muliebriter fremere...**

<sup>21</sup> 13,13

<sup>22</sup> 14,3

<sup>23</sup> Horace: Carmina 3,3,20

<sup>24</sup> Syme 1958:143 (List B)

<sup>25</sup> TLL Vol 8 1568:II, 47ff

are effeminate or soft. This does not affect its meaning in relation to women, but it does show that the word can have negative connotations. **Mulier**, according to the TLL, is used in a general sense, but it is also the word of choice for use in proverbial sayings<sup>26</sup> in Plautus (Rud. 1114) for example: **quia tacita est melior mulier semper quam loquens**. The diminutive **muliercula**, which Tacitus uses of Acte, is described in the TLL<sup>27</sup> as "a small woman, to be pitied, despised and indeed familiar, almost with the notion of enticement or flattery. It is used of mistresses, adultresses and harlots."

From the above it can be seen that **mulier** and its derivatives are used in what might be termed social and everyday contexts and can support an unfavourable nuance if the author chooses. Bauman has also noted this pejorative usage in his recent book<sup>28</sup>. He deals with the period from the mid-fourth century to AD 58, a considerable length of time, and his conclusion about the use of **mulier** and its cognates over that period is uncompromising. After quoting examples from throughout the period he says, "There is no need to labour the point. **Muliebris** is so consistently pejorative that it is not used for any laudable acts, such as the heroic deaths of Calpurnia, Servilia and Arria (VP 2.36.3, 88.3; PE 3.16)"<sup>29</sup>. In the episodes from Tacitus' Annals that I have dealt with concerning women, I feel that Tacitus also chooses to exploit this aspect of the word. His choice of **mulier** over **femina** in his remarks concerning Locusta, the poisoner whom Agrippina employs to provide the drug in the murder of Claudius is an interesting one.

**deligitur artifex talium vocabulo Locusta, nuper veneficii damnata et diu inter instrumenta regni habita. eius mulieris ingenio paratum virus...**<sup>30</sup>

The condemnatory tone of this quotation is pervasive, since not only does she have many crimes for which to answer, but Tacitus is also expressing his disapproval of the methods used by others in pursuit of **regnum**<sup>31</sup>, a theme which runs through his narrative concerning

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<sup>26</sup> TLL Vol 8 1573:C, 32ff

<sup>27</sup> TLL Vol 8 1575:40ff

<sup>28</sup> Bauman 1992:10-12 (List B)

<sup>29</sup> Bauman 1992:11-12 (List B)

<sup>30</sup> 12,66

<sup>31</sup> For discussion on the use of **regnum**, see chapter 8.

women. In this instance the use of **mulier** as opposed to **femina** in connection with a woman so obviously worthy of censure illustrates its pejorative nuance.

Rutland <sup>32</sup> also finds significance in Tacitus' use of **mulier** and its derivatives in terms of his view of the female psyche. She says

"In a number of instances sufficiently large to appear significant, **muliebris/muliebriter** qualify words denoting unreason, emotion and deception."

I would go further and say that Tacitus generally uses **mulier** and its derivatives when he wishes to give his narrative a pejorative or derogatory tone. Various nouns appear in conjunction with the adjective **muliebris**, for example, **impotentia**,<sup>33</sup> **fraus**<sup>34</sup>, **inlecebrae**<sup>35</sup>, **superbia**<sup>36</sup>, and in themselves they give some idea of the attributes that Tacitus associated with the adjective.

The TLL entry on **femina** shows that it is used by Cicero in his speeches, Catullus, Propertius, Horace, Vergil, Ovid, Seneca, Lucan, Silius Italicus and Livy; in fact in all the serious genres of literature such as poetry, epic, serious drama and tragedy. Cicero in particular uses it in associating the woman in question with attributes with a good connotation<sup>37</sup>. This is indeed a contrast to the occurrences found for **mulier**.

Tacitus' use of **femina** is likewise slightly different from his use of **mulier**. When he wishes to make a complimentary remark about a woman, or women in general, this is the word he uses. Therefore we find **feminas inlustris Iuniam et Calpurniam** <sup>38</sup> and **Calpurnia inlustris femina** <sup>39</sup>. Nowhere do we find **mulier** paired with such a laudatory adjective. Likewise we find Iunia Silana described as **nobilem feminam** <sup>40</sup> when Tacitus is describing

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<sup>32</sup> Rutland 1978-79:15 (List A)

<sup>33</sup> 12,57

<sup>34</sup> 11,3

<sup>35</sup> 14,2

<sup>36</sup> 13,14

<sup>37</sup> TLL Vol 6 458:I,2,24-31

<sup>38</sup> 14,12

<sup>39</sup> 12,22

<sup>40</sup> 11,12

how Messalina's infatuation with Silius drives her to compel him to divorce his wife so that her own adulterer should be free of entanglements. Though the occasions for the praise of women are scarce, when they do occur, Tacitus uses **femina** rather than **mulier**.

When the various rivals for the position of wife to Claudius are being discussed, Agrippina is described, among other things, as being **femina expertae fecunditatis**<sup>41</sup>, obviously a desirable attribute under the circumstances. In his address to the Senate on the subject of the Emperor's marriage, Vitellius says that

**...deligi oportere feminam nobilitate puerperiis sanctimonia insignem.**<sup>42</sup>

It is, of course, highly ironical to describe Agrippina as **sanctimonia insignem**, and later in the same passage as one in whom **congruere artes honestas**, but it does illustrate the fact that when the reference to women is intended in a good light, **femina** is the word Tacitus prefers.

Given the greater frequency of the word **femina**, it is also used in more neutral instances, for example, **nec minore ambitu feminae exarserant**<sup>43</sup>, **nemo adire praeter paucas feminas**<sup>44</sup> and **neque motis senibus et feminis iuventus sola restitit**<sup>45</sup>.

Interestingly enough, Tacitus uses **femina** more often than **mulier** in the episode concerning Boudicca, even though in two instances the women concerned are totally unRoman in their behaviour. In telling of the attack on the island of Mona by Suetonius Paulinus, Tacitus paints a spine-chilling picture of what awaited the Romans when they landed.

**Stabat pro litore diversa acies, densa armis virisque, incursantibus feminis; in modum Furiarum veste feriali, crinibus deiectis faces praeferebant...**<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps by his choice of **femina** over **mulier** in this instance Tacitus is signalling the fact that although the women do not conform in any way to the Roman ideal, and in fact they are

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<sup>41</sup> 12,2

<sup>42</sup> 12,6

<sup>43</sup> 12,1

<sup>44</sup> 13,19

<sup>45</sup> 14,32

<sup>46</sup> 14,30

described as behaving like Furies, they are nonetheless worthy of respect for defending themselves and their way of life so vigorously. In the same episode he tells of the women who foresee chaos using the same word,

**feminae in furorem turbatae adesse exitium canebant**<sup>47</sup>, perhaps not only because he is not mocking their premonitions, but also because, in using the premonitions to build up the atmosphere of the episode, he wants the reader to take them seriously.

There is a very interesting juxtaposition of the two words **femina** and **mulier** in the report of Boudicca's speech to her troops before the final battle. First of all she says that **solitum quidem Britannis feminarum ductu bellare**<sup>48</sup>, meaning that the Britons find no shame in fighting under the leadership of a woman<sup>49</sup>, but in the last remark she makes, she does not hesitate to try to shame her male followers into emulating or surpassing the example of their female leader.

**id mulieri destinatum: viverent viri et servirent.**<sup>50</sup>

The deliberate use of **mulier** here is an interesting case. Tacitus has used the word on other occasions to denote women in an inferior context, and one can only assume that he uses it in Boudicca's speech so that she can incite the men not to be outdone by a mere woman, hence **mulier**.

Having dealt with Tacitus' literary use of **femina** and **mulier**, it is interesting to discover how the words are used in a socio-legal context in a book dealing with Roman marriage. Treggiari defines their use as follows:

"**Femina**, 'female' or 'woman' (related to Sanskrit and Latin words meaning 'suck', thus a word which recalls a mammalian function), is only occasionally used to mean wife. **Mulier**, the alternative word for woman, is often used of the sexually experienced woman, contrasted with the virgin. It may therefore be used specifically of a man's wife or mistress,

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<sup>47</sup> 14,32

<sup>48</sup> 14,35

<sup>49</sup> Cf. **Agricola**, 16,1: **His atque talibus in vicem instincti, Boudicca generis regii femina duce (neque enim sexum in imperiis discernunt) sumpsere universi bellum;**...

<sup>50</sup> 14,35

though this usage is not very common. **Vir** and **femina** make the pair of 'man and woman', **vir** and **mulier** correspond more closely with 'man and wife'.<sup>51</sup>

Her most interesting comment, however, is to be found in a footnote, where she says, "A number of other Latin words derive from **mulier** in its general sense and tend to have a derogatory flavour."<sup>52</sup>

Given the traditional ideal of the Roman women, which, however outdated it had become by the period about which Tacitus is writing, still lingered in the Roman male psyche, the use of **atrox** and **ferox** to describe women is striking and surely deliberate. According to Kaplan<sup>53</sup>, these words are generally used in the context of conflict, physical or verbal, and therefore are often used in connection with soldiers. He goes on to say that when they are used in connection with women,

"their denotation changes and immediately loses all neutrality: at once they have a negative quality and their significance becomes pejorative." Since Tacitus does not use the adjective **ferox** to describe a woman in the *Annals*, although he does comment on the **ferocia** of Agrippina the younger<sup>54</sup>, I have concerned myself solely with **atrox** for the purposes of this thesis.

The entries in the **Thesaurus Linguae Latinae** for **atrox** provide an interesting picture. According to the TLL, it is used of things by which the senses are affected<sup>55</sup>, of the terrible deeds and fortunes of people<sup>56</sup>, and of abstract nouns, such as **animus**<sup>57</sup>. The most striking point to emerge from the TLL, however, is the fact **atrox** is used solely of men, except for

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<sup>51</sup> Treggiari 1991:7

<sup>52</sup> Treggiari 1991:7 (footnote 35) (List B). Unfortunately she does not elaborate, since the point is outside the scope of her investigation, but her remark shows that this use of **mulier** and its cognates has been noted by others.

<sup>53</sup> Kaplan 1979:411 (List A)

<sup>54</sup> 13,2 and 13,21

<sup>55</sup> TLL Vol 2 1108:1

<sup>56</sup> TLL Vol 2 1108:2

<sup>57</sup> TLL Vol 2 1110:3

**atrox Juno**<sup>59</sup>, **Agrippina semper atrox**<sup>58</sup>, **Poppaea semper odio, tum et metu atrox**<sup>59</sup>, **Medea**<sup>60</sup> (**Agrippinae**) **semper atrocis, tum et falsae**<sup>61</sup>, (**Antistia**) **longo dolore atrox**<sup>62</sup> and **atrox visu (Argia)**<sup>63</sup>. It is clear from this list that the use of **atrox** to describe women is a particularly Tacitean usage, since he furnishes four of the seven examples given in the TLL. Juno, or Hera, in the example from the Aeneid, is well known for her enmity towards the Trojans in the Trojan War, while the Thebaid of Statius, who is roughly a contemporary of Tacitus, is also an epic poem. Kaplan says of these examples, "...this is a lofty group, composed of royalty both human and divine."<sup>64</sup>

Of the four women in the Annals whom Tacitus characterises as **atrox**, the two Agrippinas, Poppaea Sabina, wife of Nero, and Pollitta, daughter of L. Antistius Vetus and wife of Rubellius Plautus, three are members of the imperial family and close to the seat of power. The exception is Antistia Pollitta. Agrippina the younger and Poppaea in particular strive to gain power for themselves; Agrippina the elder has it thrust upon her whether she wants it or not by virtue of her birth and position as Germanicus' wife. She displays **ferocia** while secure in the position of Roman wife, for example, by commanding troops in Germany in an emergency, but I will attempt to show elsewhere<sup>65</sup> that once she is widowed she is the least able of the three imperial women to exploit her position successfully. Nevertheless, in general terms, always bearing in mind the traditional role of the Roman woman, Kaplan's comment is justified.

<sup>59</sup> Vergil: Aeneid 1,662: **urit atrox Juno**.

<sup>58</sup> Tacitus: Annals 4,52

<sup>59</sup> Tacitus: Annals 14,61

<sup>60</sup> Valerius Flaccus: 6,662

<sup>61</sup> Tacitus: Annals 13,13

<sup>62</sup> Tacitus: Annals 16,10. Antistia's excess of grief at her husband's death might be considered as eminently womanly, but when she goes to plead with Nero for her father's life, Tacitus describes her actions thus: **...modo muliebri eiulatu, aliquando sexum egressa voce infensa clamitabat...**16,10. Cf. next footnote.

<sup>63</sup> Statius: Thebaid 12,222. This use of **atrox** is particularly interesting, since in line 179 Statius describes Argia as "**sexuque...relicto**", in other words, behaving in an unwomanly fashion.

<sup>64</sup> Kaplan 1979:416-417 (List A)

<sup>65</sup> See chapter 6.

"It is significant that in the case of these three imperial women those qualities associated with **atrox** are assigned as an integral and habitual part of their character (they are all **semper (!) atrox**); that is, **atrox** is for them an internally motivated characteristic".<sup>66</sup>

On occasion Tacitus uses the same word about two different women so as to underscore the coincidence of their characters. An example taken from the accounts of Messalina and Agrippina will serve to illustrate this point. Both women are seized by a desire for the gardens belonging to someone else, Messalina for those of Asiaticus,<sup>67</sup> Agrippina for those of Statilius Taurus.<sup>68</sup> Both women bring trumped up charges against the owners of the coveted gardens and as a consequence both men are driven to suicide. In describing the desire of Messalina and Agrippina to possess the luxury symbolised by the gardens, Tacitus uses the same word in both episodes, **inhians**, and when the reader comes across the word for the second time, there is not only the shock of recognition, but the word brings with it all the associations of the previous encounter. The reader's awareness that Messalina contrived the death of Asiaticus in order to possess his gardens makes Agrippina's actions towards Statilius Taurus seem to have almost the inevitability of Greek tragedy. This effect is generated in large part by the repetition of one word, **inhians**. There is a previous use of the verb **inhiare**, though not as a present participle, and this is in connection with Agrippina the elder. When Sejanus is trying to remove Agrippina and her family as a threat to Tiberius' throne, he has Livia and Livilla whisper in Tiberius' ear, warning him about Agrippina's alleged political ambitions.

**igitur contumaciam eius insectari, vetus Augustae odium, recentem Liviae conscientiam exagitare, ut superbam fecunditate, subnixam popularibus studiis inhiare dominationem apud Caesarem arguerent**<sup>69</sup>.

I will show elsewhere<sup>70</sup> that of the three women about whom Tacitus uses the verb **inhiare**, Agrippina the elder is the only one to whom it does not apply. It must be noted that its use

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<sup>66</sup> Kaplan 1979:414 (List A)

<sup>67</sup> 11,1

<sup>68</sup> 12,59

<sup>69</sup> 4,12

<sup>70</sup> See chapter 6.

in connection with Agrippina the elder is, in any case, in the context of a false accusation brought against her by Sejanus. She does not, in fact, long for power, and therefore does nothing to fulfil this alleged desire, whereas Messalina and Agrippina the younger do indeed desire the gardens belonging to others, and in fact drive the owners to suicide to satisfy their longing.

This survey is by no means an exhaustive one, but it does show that Tacitus takes great care in choosing the right word for the context, and more especially for the effect he wishes to create. The nuances created are not always obvious, and frequently the effect is only realised cumulatively, with the repetition of a word reinforcing the meaning Tacitus wishes to convey. Each repetition brings with it the associations of the previous instances, and in this way Tacitus builds up the atmosphere he requires.

## CHAPTER 5: LIVIA

Perhaps the most impressive female character in the *Annals* is one who does not actually figure a great deal in the main narrative, but who is always there like a brooding presence in the mind of the reader. In the same way that Augustus himself is the original against whom all other emperors are measured, so Livia, the first Augusta, serves as a reference point for all future empresses, and indeed for all important female characters. Since Tacitus contents himself with a brief introduction outlining the history of Rome prior to the establishment of the principate, and confines himself to a mere five chapters concerning Augustus before beginning to deal with the reign of Tiberius, his comments on Livia as the wife of Augustus are perforce brief, but telling nonetheless. She features more fully in the narrative as the mother of Tiberius. Baumann comments on this duality as follows: "One, the mother of the emperor Tiberius, emerges as a fully three-dimensional figure from the pages of Tacitus. The other, the wife of the emperor Augustus, has to be cobbled together from scattered pieces of evidence in various sources."<sup>1</sup>

The very first mention of her name is in the phrase **novercae Liviae dolus**<sup>2</sup> and this immediately sets the tone for his portrait of Livia as a scheming woman whom he thinks capable of having a hand in the murder of her husband's grandsons<sup>3</sup>. The negative connotations of the individual words, **noverca** and **dolus**, combine to intensify the impression Tacitus is purposely creating. In consulting the relevant volume of Thompson's Motif Index of Folk Literature<sup>4</sup> it is instructive to find that the entry concerning cruel stepmothers is considerably longer than any other entry under the general heading "Cruel step- and foster relatives". Consequently, it is safe to say that the word step-mother has evil connotations in most languages, even when it stands alone. **Noverca** recurs on several

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<sup>1</sup> Bauman 1992:124 (List B)

<sup>2</sup> 1,3

<sup>3</sup> See Dixon 1988:156 (List B) for stepmothers' preference for their own children. See also Ryberg 1942:388-390 (List A) on Tacitus' charges against Livia as a stepmother.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson 1957:Vol.5:300 (List B). See also Dixon 1988:156-157 (List B) for the dominant prejudice against stepmothers in Latin literature.

occasions in the *Annals*<sup>5</sup>, and on each occasion these reverberations are felt. By using **dolus**, which in these instances has only the meaning of guile or deceit<sup>6</sup>, in combination with **noverca**, Tacitus is manipulating the reader's reaction to Livia along the lines he desires.

At this point Tiberius is the only surviving stepson of Augustus and everything points to his succession to the throne. Tacitus' comment on this situation is revealing.

**filius, collega imperii, consors tribuniciae potestatis adsumitur omnisque per exercitus ostentatur, non obscuris, ut antea, matris artibus, sed palam hortatu.**<sup>7</sup>

Here we have a foreshadowing of the secret machinations of Agrippina the younger as she schemes to place her son on the throne. Although Tacitus does not spend much time on detailing Livia's actions on Tiberius' behalf, merely leaving the reader to imagine what **obscuris matris artibus**<sup>8</sup> might denote, later on the reader will easily recall the impressions created.

Livia's influence over Augustus also anticipates Agrippina's over Claudius. On reading the later account, the reader will be forced, in retrospect, to admire Livia's strength of personality, since Agrippina has only to deal with the indecisive Claudius, whereas Livia has to bend the far more formidable Augustus to her will. That she does so successfully attests to her strength of purpose.

**nam senem Augustum devinxerat adeo, uti nepotem unicum, Agrippam Postumum, in insulam Planasiam proiecerit, rudem sane bonarum artium et robore corporis stolide ferocem, nullius tamen flagitii conpertum.**<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For example, of Livia: 1,6 (**novercalibus odiis**); 1,10 (**gravis domui Caesarum noverca**); and of Agrippina: 12,26 (**perintempestiva novercae officia in ludibrium vertebat** when alluding to Britannicus' attitude to her); 12,41 (**datosque a noverca custodiae eius imponit** when noting Agrippina's successful removal of Britannicus' tutors, and their replacement with her own supporters); 12,65 (**novercae insidiis**).

<sup>6</sup> L&S s.v. **dolus** II

<sup>7</sup> 1,3

<sup>8</sup> For a recent study of manipulative innuendo in the vocabulary of Tacitus' narration see Henderson 1989:167-195.

<sup>9</sup> 1,3

The use of **devinxerat** here is interesting since the word recurs later in connection with other influential women and their relationships with powerful or potentially powerful men. When recounting Messalina's mock marriage with Silius, Claudius is described as

**hebetem ...et uxori devinctum...**<sup>10</sup>

in contrast to the young, attractive and ambitious Silius. Claudius does not benefit from the comparison. Lepida, Nero's aunt, is said to have brought her influence to bear on Nero, and to describe this situation Tacitus uses the same word.

**nam Lepida blandimentis ac largitionibus iuvenilem animum devinciebat.**<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, Poppaea uses the participle of the same verb to taunt Nero by comparing him to Otho. She describes Nero as

**paelice ancilla et adsuetudine Actes devinctum.**<sup>12</sup>

The basic meaning of **devincire**<sup>13</sup> is to bind fast, to tie up, and this is an illuminating metaphor for the above situations, where the man in each case is manipulated by an unscrupulous female. Each time the word is used in a similar situation, the reverberations from the previous occasions are felt and the cumulative effect underlines the theme of the influential, manipulative woman.

To return to the narrative. Although it is recognised that Tiberius is the obvious choice for the succession on the death of Augustus, his cause was not helped, according to Tacitus, by the **éminence grise** of his mother.

**accedere matrem muliebri inpotentia:...**<sup>14</sup>

The phrase **inpotentia muliebris** is used again later in the story of Agrippina the younger, which has many parallels with the tale of Livia. Agrippina has taken action against the freedman Narcissus, and in retaliation he accuses her of **inpotentia muliebris**.

**nec ille reticet, inpotentiam muliebrem nimiasque spes eius arguens.**<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> 11,28

<sup>11</sup> 12,64

<sup>12</sup> 13,46

<sup>13</sup> L&S s.v. **devincio**

<sup>14</sup> 1,4

<sup>15</sup> 12,57. See Baldwin 1972:94 (List B) where he remarks, "Until her death and obituary notice, Livia lurks in the background: a constant and sinister presence. As noted before,

By using the same combination of noun and adjective to describe two different women, Tacitus underlines their links in the reader's mind very successfully. I have noted previously<sup>16</sup> the pejorative nuance<sup>17</sup> of **mulier** and its cognates in the episodes of the *Annals* dealing with women, and these two examples exemplify this shade of meaning.

There is a further parallel, more in sentiment than in vocabulary, in the next phrase in Book 1,4,...**serviendum feminae**<sup>18</sup>. Rutland<sup>19</sup> makes the interesting observation that there is some controversy over this sentence since the identity of the person or persons upon whom the obligation expressed in the gerundive **serviendum** falls is left unexplained: is it Tiberius or the whole state that is to be a slave to Livia? In the corresponding comment on Agrippina after her marriage to Claudius there is no ambiguity; everything is subject to Agrippina.

**versa ex eo civitas et cuncta feminae oboediebant.**<sup>20</sup>

In continuing with the story of Livia Tacitus uses another word which recurs frequently in connection with Agrippina the younger, **scelus**<sup>21</sup>. I have shown previously<sup>22</sup> that he uses different words to describe the misdemeanours of Messalina and Agrippina the younger, thereby highlighting his different perception of the two women. When dealing with Livia he uses a word which will occur later in association with Agrippina, indicating a similarity between them. In the phrase

**quidam scelus uxoris suspectabant**<sup>23</sup>

he is not only foreshadowing Agrippina the younger, but he is also building up an impression of Livia's character. He has already used the word **dolus** about her in chapter 3

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she fulfils the role of the archetypal wicked **noverca**. In this she is designed to anticipate the other monstrous dowager of the *Annals*: the younger Agrippina. Tacitus ensures the comparison by applying the formula of **muliebris inpotentia** to both."

<sup>16</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>17</sup> See Bauman 1992:10-12 (List B)

<sup>18</sup> 1,4

<sup>19</sup> Rutland 1978-79:18 (List A)

<sup>20</sup> 12,7

<sup>21</sup> For example 12,3; 12,66; 12,67

<sup>22</sup> See chapter 4

<sup>23</sup> 1,5

and now he adds a further uncomplimentary noun, which will intensify the impression he is creating. **Quidam** also deserves some comment, in that it is an example of a technique that Tacitus uses frequently throughout the *Annals*. Pauw lists **quidam** under his catalogue of what he calls "unidentified spokesmen"<sup>24</sup>, who are used by Tacitus to impart negative information about a character, for which he is not prepared to take responsibility himself, but which, nonetheless, he does not want to omit. Pauw says:

"In a shrewd (one might say "journalistic") way Tacitus transfers the onus of acceptance or rejection of the suggested portrait to the reader."

Tacitus' next sentence displays the same technique, only this time he uses the word **rumor**<sup>25</sup> to achieve the same effect. At this point Tacitus recounts the rumour that Livia was involved in the death of Paullus Fabius Maximus, who had accompanied Augustus to Planasia. Here Augustus was allegedly reconciled with Agrippa Postumus, a reconciliation which would have threatened all Livia's carefully laid plans had it come to fruition. The death of Augustus follows swiftly, and Tacitus' report of Livia's alleged part in the events surrounding it reminds the reader strongly of Livy's account of Tanaquil's behaviour after the death of Tarquin, when she takes control of the situation and succeeds in placing Servius on the throne<sup>26</sup>. Bauman comments on Livia's actions on the death of Augustus in this way: "Livia had at last assumed the dominant role to which she was so well suited by both birth and character. She would come close to institutionalizing that role in her son's reign."<sup>27</sup> There is also in Livia's behaviour at this point a foreshadowing of Agrippina's behaviour on the death of Claudius, which is described in much greater detail in Book 12,66-69.

There are direct verbal links between the opening phrases of Book 1,6 and Book 13,1, respectively:

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<sup>24</sup> Pauw 1980:84 (List A)

<sup>25</sup> Pauw 1980:84 (List A). Pauw lists **rumor** as an impersonal expression, along with **fama**, **vulgabatur**, **creditum** and **dicitur**.

<sup>26</sup> 1,41,5. See chapter in Appendix on Tanaquil.

<sup>27</sup> Bauman 1992:128 (List B)

**Primum facinus novi principatus and**

**Prima novo principatu mors,**

which leave the reader in no doubt about Tacitus' intention to underline the reader's awareness of the similarities in the two situations. There is a further link between the two episodes in the subversion of the annalistic genre in which Tacitus is writing. The annalists began each year with the names of the consuls, and the reader expects something similar for the new reign. However, by departing from the annalistic norm Tacitus jolts the reader and adds to the shock of the words<sup>28</sup>. Tacitus does not impute the crime to Augustus himself, but rather to Tiberius and Livia

**illum metu, hanc novercalibus odiis...**<sup>29</sup>

thereby reinforcing the impression of Livia as the ultimate in wicked stepmothers. He mentions her role as a stepmother again, also in unfavourable terms, in his review of Augustus' reign:

**postremo Livia gravis in rem publicam mater, gravis domui Caesarum noverca...**<sup>30</sup>

**Gravis**, which must in this instance be taken in its sense of harsh, severe or oppressive, will come to mind later when the reader comes to Nero's decision to murder his mother.

**postremo, ubicumque haberetur, praegravem ratus interficere constituit.**<sup>31</sup>

**Praegravis** is the intensive form of **gravis**, and when used of persons is a typically Tacitean usage<sup>32</sup>.

In the narrative concerning Livia, Tacitus next notes the first signs of dissension between her and Tiberius, which anticipates the dissension later between Agrippina and Nero<sup>33</sup>. Livia is adopted into the Julian family with the title of Augusta under the terms of Augustus' will, but according to Bauman the title "Augusta" is ambiguous. He says: "As

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<sup>28</sup> For Tacitus' departure from the norms of the genre through his technique and use of language, see Henderson 1989:168 (List A).

<sup>29</sup> 1,6

<sup>30</sup> 1,10

<sup>31</sup> 14,3

<sup>32</sup> L&S s.v. **praegravis** II; cf. 11,19 (of Claudius); 4,71 (of Tiberius' agents)

<sup>33</sup> See Henderson 1989:168 (List A) for "doublets" and parallelisms between Tiberius and Nero.

'Augustus' was a more specific designation of the ruling emperor than 'Caesar', so it could be (and was) argued that "Augusta" meant more than a mere dowager; it designated an empress. Tiberius was aware of the anomaly."<sup>34</sup> The Senate wishes to honour the Augusta, but Tiberius vetoes their suggestions for awarding her various titles, among them **mater patriae**.

**alii parentem, alii matrem patriae appellandam, plerique ut nomini Caesaris adscriberetur "Iuliae filius" censebant.**<sup>35</sup>

Tacitus takes the opportunity to impute unworthy motives to Tiberius, asserting that he was

**...anxius invidia et muliebre fastigium in deminutionem sui accipiens...**<sup>36</sup>

The use of the adjective **muliebre**<sup>37</sup> adds a derogatory note to the sentence<sup>38</sup>, underlining the fact that the elevation of a woman to such an exalted rank is not part of the Roman male's thought pattern.

Tiberius and Livia are not, however, always at odds. In the complicated family intrigues for power, they are at one in their opposition to Germanicus, whose popularity is far greater than Tiberius', and who therefore constitutes a threat to his position. Germanicus' connections are noted, along with his disadvantages.

**...ipse Druso fratre Tiberii genitus, Augustae nepos, set anxius occultis in se patru aviaeque odiis quorum causae acriores quia iniquae.**<sup>39</sup>

Here we have **odiis** used again in connection with Livia, this time in her capacity as **avia**, whereas previously it was used of her as **noverca**. This serves to emphasise the intrigue within the imperial family itself as its members jockey for power and position. In describing Livia's hatreds as being **occultis**, Tacitus is using a word that he frequently employs<sup>40</sup> in connection with her, a word that emphasises the clandestine nature of her

<sup>34</sup> Bauman 1992:131 (List B)

<sup>35</sup> 1, 14

<sup>36</sup> 1, 14

<sup>37</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>38</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>39</sup> 1, 33

<sup>40</sup> For example, 2, 77; 3, 64; 4, 71

machinations. Livia's position as stepmother is noted again when Tacitus describes her attitude to Agrippina the elder, wife of Germanicus.

**accedebant muliebres offensiones novercalibus Liviae in Agrippinam stimulis...**<sup>41</sup>

**Muliebres offensiones** presages the phrase **muliebribus causis**<sup>42</sup> which Tacitus uses to explain Agrippina the younger's feud with Domitia Lepida. The use of **muliebris** in these contexts is very obviously disdainful, and serves to add a disparaging tone to the narrative. When linked with **novercalis**, which carries all the negative connotations of **noverca** noted above, Tacitus' direction of the reader's reaction is obviously deliberate.

Despite the death of Augustus, Livia continues to wield considerable power and influence, and Bauman believes that "Livia's incessant demands for a share in power"<sup>43</sup> are at the root of the dissension between her and Tiberius. That she does wield considerable power is evidenced by her defence of her friend Urgulania who was summoned to court by L. Piso.

**haud minus liberi doloris documentum idem Piso mox dedit vocata in ius Vrgulania, quam supra leges amicitia Augustae extulerat.**<sup>44</sup>

This is an extremely illuminating comment, illustrating the extent of Livia's powers of patronage. That Livia's friendship should render anyone **supra leges** implies a great deal about the nature of the imperial court and Livia's **de facto**, if not **de iure**, authority. Tiberius is compelled to support Livia in this incident, showing that she is still a force to be reckoned with.

In the recounting of the events concerning Piso and Germanicus, Tacitus relates the view held by some that Piso received secret instructions from Tiberius but is in no doubt himself that Livia advised Plancina, Piso's wife.

**Credidere quidam data et a Tiberio occulta mandata; et Plancinam haud dubie Augusta monuit aemulatione muliebri Agrippinam adsectandi.**<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> 1,33

<sup>42</sup> 12,64

<sup>43</sup> Bauman 1992:133 (List B)

<sup>44</sup> 2,34

<sup>45</sup> 2,43

**Credidere quidam** is another example of Tacitus' unidentified spokesmen<sup>46</sup>, and there is no doubt about the negative impact that this information has on Tacitus' portrait of Tiberius. This time we find **muliebris** paired with another noun denoting an unfeminine activity, **aemulatio**, in order to denote feminine dissension and rivalry that Tacitus does not approve of.

Plancina and Piso are the main protagonists in the plot that leads to Germanicus' death, but from the quotation above and the following one it is clear that Tacitus, at any rate, believed that more powerful figures were behind the conspiracy. When Piso is taking advice about his next move after the death of Germanicus, Domitius Celer advises him not to return to Rome at the same time as Agrippina who is bearing the ashes of Germanicus, but to remain in Syria and wait for more favourable developments.

**est tibi Augustae conscientia, est Caesaris favor, sed in occulto; et perisse Germanicum nulli iactantius maerent quam qui maxime laetantur.**<sup>47</sup>

We have already been told that Livia worked **obscuris matris artibus** to place Tiberius on the throne; now Tacitus infers that she secretly - **in occulto** - connived at the death of Germanicus. I have noted the use of **occultus** above in connection with Livia. This further instance adds to the cumulative effect. Once again Tacitus highlights the difference between public appearances and private realities, alleging that ostentatious mourning for Germanicus hides secret rejoicing. He reinforces this in his account of the public mourning that attends the arrival of Agrippina the elder and her children in Italy, and his comment on the non-attendance of Antonia, Germanicus' mother, at the ceremonies, is made with rare authorial intervention, since Tacitus does not usually seek to influence his readers so obviously.

**facilius crediderim Tiberio et Augusta, qui domo non excedebant, cohibitam, ut par maeror et matris exemplo avia quoque et patruus attineri viderentur.**<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Pauw 1980:84 (List A)

<sup>47</sup> 2,77

<sup>48</sup> 3,3

Throughout the recounting of the circumstances surrounding Germanicus' death Tacitus is at pains to show that Livia has worked against the interests of members of her family, and her protection of Plancina is a case in point. As Piso's wife, Plancina is at risk, but her friendship with Livia saves her.

**Eadem Plancinae invidia, maior gratia; eoque ambiguum habebatur quantum Caesari in eam liceret.**<sup>49</sup>

This is a good example of Tacitean brevity, which needs only five words, **eadem Plancinae invidia, maior gratia**, to convey a whole background of meaning. It also shows that Livia still wields a great deal of influence with Tiberius and is in fact successful on behalf of her friend, who loses no time in dissociating herself from her husband, despite her promises of support to the end. So much for the traditional loyalty of the ideal Roman matron for her husband.

**ut secretis Augustae precibus veniam obtinuit, paulatim segregari a marito, dividere defensionem coepit.**<sup>50</sup>

The occasion of Livia's illness provides Tacitus with another opportunity to cast doubt on the state of relations between mother and son.

**sub idem tempus Iuliae Augustae valetudo atrox necessitudinem principi fecit festinati in urbem reditus, sincera adhuc inter matrem filiumque concordia sive occultis odiis.**<sup>51</sup>

Whatever the true state of affairs, it is politic for Tiberius to return to Rome and associate himself with the religious observances held for her recovery. Nevertheless, the use of two words that have been associated previously with Livia<sup>52</sup>, **occultis odiis**, shows that Tacitus himself is sceptical about the harmony of their relationship. Throughout the narrative both Livia and Tiberius are credited with great powers of dissembling, and Tacitus does not miss this opportunity to add yet another possible instance to the tally. Likewise, **odium** is

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<sup>49</sup> 3,15

<sup>50</sup> 3,15

<sup>51</sup> 3,64

<sup>52</sup> 1,33

found frequently in connection with Livia<sup>53</sup>, as she seems to cultivate her enmities. One longstanding recipient of her hatred is Agrippina the elder, who is no match for Livia in the fields of intrigue or politics, but who is always treated as a threat. When Sejanus is plotting against Agrippina he is well aware that Livia can be counted on as an ally because of the **vetus Augustae odium**<sup>54</sup> towards Agrippina.

It is significant, when assessing the extent of Livia's power and influence, that Tacitus ascribes to her the responsibility for Tiberius' decision to live away from Rome.

**traditur<sup>55</sup> etiam matris impotentia extrusum quam dominationis sociam aspernabatur neque depellere poterat, cum dominationem ipsam donum eius accepisset. nam dubitaverat Augustus Germanicum, sororis nepotem et cunctis laudatum, rei Romani imponere, sed precibus uxoris evictus Tiberio Germanicum, sibi Tiberium adscivit. idque Augusta exprobrabat, reposcebat.**<sup>56</sup>

This paragraph indicates very clearly the extent of Livia's influence, not only over her son, Tiberius, but also over her husband, Augustus. To be successful in gaining the throne for her son, over the universally popular Germanicus, and perhaps against the better judgement of Augustus himself, and to maintain that influence over Tiberius proves that she is a very formidable lady. One of Tacitus' final comments on Tiberius testifies to the extent of her influence over Tiberius:

**...idem inter bona malaque mixtus incolumi matre.**<sup>57</sup>

She can, nonetheless, be magnanimous in victory. Augustus' granddaughter had been exiled to the island of Trimerum after being convicted of adultery.

**illic viginti annis exilium toleravit Augustae ope sustentata, quae florentis privignos cum per occultum subvertisset, misericordiam erga adflictos palam ostentabat.**<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> 1,6; 1,33; 4,12

<sup>54</sup> 4,12

<sup>55</sup> Another of Pauw's impersonal expressions: see Pauw 1980:84 (List A) and above.

<sup>56</sup> 4,57

<sup>57</sup> 6,51

<sup>58</sup> 4,71

Or is it magnanimity? I think that Tacitus is taking the opportunity to underline Livia's capacity for working towards the ruin of her enemies, always **per occultum**, rather than praising her for her pity once the enemies are no longer a threat. This may explain her longstanding hatred for Agrippina the elder, who never ceased to be a threat in Livia's estimation, and indeed outlived her.

Livia's obituary notice appears at the beginning of Book 5 and is curiously mild, after the insinuations that Tacitus has made at each mention of her in the narrative. In keeping with tradition, he lists the nobility of her birth and her adoption into the Livii and Julii, and her marriage to Tiberius Claudius Nero, the father of her children. There is a passing reference to what may have been one of the important weapons in her armoury when Tacitus says

**exim Caesar cupidine formae aufert marito.**<sup>59</sup>

For such a consummate politician as Augustus<sup>60</sup>, this action seems to be slightly out of character<sup>61</sup>, and gives another indication of Livia's extraordinary attributes<sup>62</sup>. The words that follow, **incertum an invitam**<sup>63</sup> suggest that Livia may have been a willing accomplice. Certainly, if she snared Augustus through physical attraction, she transformed it into extensive influence and power which lasted long after the initial attraction must have dimmed, even beyond the death of Augustus himself. Suetonius gives quite a different account of the circumstances surrounding the marriage of Livia and Augustus:

**cum quo brevi reconciliata inter omnis pace Romam redit uxoremque Liviam Drusillam et tunc gravidam et ante iam apud se filium enixam petenti Augusto concessit.**<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> 5,1

<sup>60</sup> For Augustus' possible motivation, see Hallett 1984:323-324 (List B)

<sup>61</sup> 1,10 describes Livia as **abducta uxor Neroni** but see footnote 62.

<sup>62</sup> Flory 1988:343 (List A) notes that "Velleius Paterculus, Cassius Dio, Pliny the Elder and one report in Suetonius, however, state that Tiberius Nero, Livia's first husband, willingly divorced his wife to give her in marriage to Octavian." She argues that the hostile version of the marriage given by Tacitus had its origins in the propaganda of Antony.

<sup>63</sup> 5,1

<sup>64</sup> Suetonius: Tiberius 4,3

It is interesting to note at this point that, despite her previous marriage, Livia is often described as having only one husband, as she is, for example, by Horace in the phrase **unico gaudens mulier marito**<sup>65</sup>.

Livia no doubt fostered the impression of adherence to traditional Roman wifely values, **sanctitate domus priscum ad morem,...**<sup>66</sup>

but after reading all that Tacitus has to say about her in the first four books of the Annals, it comes as a surprise to have her described as

**comis ultra quam antiquis feminis probatum...**<sup>67</sup>.

For a woman whose most frequent emotion in the preceding books seems to have been **odium**, this is a turnabout indeed. Similarly, it is hard to reconcile the woman who persuaded Augustus to give up his plan to make Germanicus his heir as **uxor facilis**<sup>68</sup>, but the description of her as **mater impotens**<sup>69</sup> fits in better with the preceding narrative. Her incomparable ability to get her own way with both Augustus and Tiberius is dealt with in one line.

**cum artibus mariti, simulatione filii bene composita.**<sup>70</sup>

She is, indeed, a match for both of them.

Upon her death, Tiberius continues to show hostility towards his mother. He does not attend her funeral, a modest affair in the mausoleum of Augustus, and the eulogy is given by her great-grandson, Caligula. Tiberius also curtails the honours that the Senate votes to her memory, including that of deification:

**...et addito ne caelestis religio decerneretur: sic ipsam maluisse.**<sup>71</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Odes 3,14,5. See Pomeroy 1975:161 (List B)

<sup>66</sup> 5,1

<sup>67</sup> 5,1. It is possible that there is irony in the verbal echo of Sallust's Sempronia, of whom it is said **...psallere saltare elegantius, quam necesse est probae...**(*de coniuratione Catilinae*, 25)

<sup>68</sup> 5,1. It is possible that here Tacitus means what Suetonius says in Augustus, 71: **circa libidines haesit, postea quoque, ut ferunt, ad vitiandas virgines promptior, quae sibi undique etiam ab uxore conquirentur.**

<sup>69</sup> 5,1

<sup>70</sup> 5,1

<sup>71</sup> 5,2

According to Tacitus, the effects of Livia's death are felt immediately, since Tiberius no longer feels bound by her restraining influence.

**Ceterum ex eo praerupta iam et urgens dominatio: nam incolumi Augusta erat adhuc perfugium, quia Tiberio inveteratum erga matrem obsequium neque Seianus audebat auctoritati parentis antire.**<sup>72</sup>

Tiberius' denunciation of Agrippina and Nero comes so soon after Livia's death that it is believed that it came before her death and that she had suppressed it<sup>73</sup>. This restraining influence of Livia over Tiberius anticipates a very similar circumstance surrounding the death of Agrippina the younger, and the loss of her inhibiting influence on Nero. The parallels between the two sets of circumstances are obvious; it is as if Tacitus merely sketched the situation in the case of Livia and Tiberius, but drew a full-blown portrait in the case of Agrippina and Nero.

Despite the fact that she does not play as large a role in the Annals as, for instance, either of the two Agrippinas, Livia casts a long shadow throughout the rest of the narrative. Her influence over Tiberius is pervasive, and it is during his reign that she shows herself to be **dominandi avida**, by insisting on his recognition of the fact that she has, to a large extent, been responsible for his position as emperor<sup>74</sup>. Tiberius has constantly to block her attempts to secure a position as **dominationis sociam**<sup>75</sup>, and although Tacitus generally puts an uncomplimentary construction on Tiberius' actions<sup>76</sup>, one cannot help but feel a certain sympathy with Tiberius in the face of such a domineering mother, who, without a shadow of a doubt, was, indeed, **dominandi avida**. Being the first imperial consort and mother, Livia acts as a yardstick for all of them, and the reader cannot help but judge the others by the standard she has set, either for good or for evil.

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<sup>72</sup> 5,3

<sup>73</sup> Martin 1981:132, 141 (List B)

<sup>74</sup> 4,57

<sup>75</sup> 4,57

<sup>76</sup> 1,14

CHAPTER 6: AGRIPPINA THE ELDER

Agrippina the elder was the daughter of Augustus' only child, Julia, and Marcus Agrippa. As Augustus' direct descendant she had immense prestige, which was added to by her marriage in AD 5 to Germanicus, who was a grandson of Livia, Augustus' second wife. A significant feature of Tacitus' narrative concerning Agrippina the elder is the frequent reference to her noble birth and illustrious family background<sup>1</sup>. Tacitus' summing up of Agrippina is uncompromising:

**sed Agrippina aequi impatiens, dominandi avida, virilibus curis feminarum vitia exuerat.**<sup>2</sup>

I hope to show in the course of this chapter that, in comparison with several of the other women in this study, notably her daughter Agrippina the younger, she does not deserve this obituary notice. On the contrary, I would agree with Hallett that Tacitus portrays Agrippina the elder as "a tragic and victimised figure."<sup>3</sup> The use of **femina** here is noteworthy and demands comment. At first glance it appears to be a pejorative use, and therefore in contradiction to my argument in chapter four about the use of **mulier** in disparaging contexts. In this instance, however, Tacitus is talking about the weaknesses or failings of women, rather than vices, and **femina** is used here as part of the Roman male perception of the frailty of the feminine character. As I have noted previously in chapter four, Treggiari<sup>4</sup> says that "**Vir** and **femina** make the pair 'man and woman'..." and since Tacitus is directly contrasting **feminarum vitia** with **virilibus curis**, I think that it is in this context that the use of **femina** in this passage should be seen.

The interlocking relationships of the imperial family are extremely intricate, but they do exemplify the Roman predilection for accumulating wealth, power and position within

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<sup>1</sup> Hallett 1984:56 (List B) says "...such women commanded additional and simultaneous respect as daughters of powerful men."

<sup>2</sup> 6,25

<sup>3</sup> Hallett 1984:340 (list B)

<sup>4</sup> Treggiari 1991:7

one's own family by advantageous marriages<sup>5</sup>. Since the idea of primogeniture did not hold sway in Roman society, every son shared in his father's property<sup>6</sup>, and consequently there was a greater need for property to divide up among the sons. In addition, each son was as important as the other, and there was equal opportunity for each son to share in a man's prestige.

This close familial relationship is highlighted at the first mention of Agrippina the elder in the *Annals*.

**Interea Germanico per Gallias, ut diximus, census accipienti excessisse Augustum fertur. neptem eius Agrippinam in matrimonio pluresque ex ea liberos habebat, ipse Druso fratre Tiberii genitus, Augustae nepos, set anxius occultis in se patru aviaeque odiis quorum causae acriores quia iniquae.**<sup>7</sup>

With remarkable brevity Tacitus manages to convey the essence of the imperial family in these lines; closely interlocking relationships, and equally close familial rivalries, alliances and discord. The theme of the **occultis odiis** of Livia, who is Germanicus' grandmother, or **avia**, runs through the entire narrative in which she appears<sup>8</sup>.

Agrippina the elder is at first presented as an admirable type of Roman woman, but even so she does not escape the inevitable lot of a member of the court, dislike and jealousy from her fellows.

**accedebant muliebres offensiones novercalibus Liviae in Agrippinam stimulis, atque ipsa Agrippina paulo commotior, nisi quod castitate et mariti amore quamvis indomitum animum in bonum vertebat.**<sup>9</sup>

**Muliebres offensiones** is a theme that runs through the *Annals* wherever female characters appear, even though the terminology may not be exactly the same<sup>10</sup>, and I have

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<sup>5</sup> See Treggiari 1991:115-116 (List B) for the complicated relationships of the imperial family.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas 1962:237 (List B)

<sup>7</sup> 1,33

<sup>8</sup> See chapter 5.

<sup>9</sup> 1,33

<sup>10</sup> For example, **muliebribus causis**, 12,64; **insidias mulieris**, 13,13

discussed elsewhere<sup>11</sup> the manner in which the use of **muliebris** as an adjective seems to carry some sort of pejorative connotation. Rivalry, even irrational rivalry, between men is never described as **virilis**<sup>12</sup>, but when it occurs between women it is often characterised as **muliebris**. The use of the adjective **novercalis** in connection with Livia<sup>13</sup> adds yet another instance to the many references to her as a stepmother, with all its sinister connotations. McDougall comments on this passage saying,

"For Tacitus Agrippina's **pudicitia** and **castitas** are beyond all reproach. When comparing Agrippina with Livia, he emphasises that, though she may have been headstrong, her chastity and love for her husband not only mitigated that potential flaw but made it a virtue."<sup>14</sup> Agrippina the elder's virtues as a wife, duly noted in the above quotation, are in stark contrast to her daughter's way of life, which will be apparent to the reader later on in the narrative. Indeed, much of Agrippina the elder's popularity stems from these very virtues. **Castitate et mariti amore** is not a phrase that springs to mind when dealing with Agrippina the younger. Likewise, the number of Agrippina the elder's children is unusual, nine in all, six of whom survived infancy<sup>15</sup>. During the period under review, childlessness is on the increase, and this large family is a striking deviation from the norm<sup>16</sup>.

The importance of family relationships is emphasised in the episode of the mutiny among the German troops, but it must not be overlooked that Tacitus here takes the opportunity to paint Agrippina the elder in a very favourable light: the fearful populace, critical of Germanicus' failure to obtain reinforcements, and the weeping Germanicus are both contrasted with the strong, resolute Roman matron, living up to her heritage.

**Eo in metu arguere Germanicum omnes quod non ad superiorem exercitum pergeret, ...vel si vilis ipsi salus, cur filium parvulum, cur gravidam coniugem inter**

<sup>11</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. description of the rivalry between Suetonius Paulinus and Corbulo referred to in 14,29.

<sup>13</sup> See chapter 5 for discussion of **noverca** and its cognates.

<sup>14</sup> McDougall 1981:105 (List A)

<sup>15</sup> Suetonius: Gaius 7: **habuit in matrimonio Agrippinam, M. Agrippae et Iuliae filiam, et ex ea novem liberos tulit: quorum duo infantes adhuc rapti, unus iam puerascens insigni festivitate...**

<sup>16</sup> McDougall 1981:105 (List A)

**furentis et omnis humani iuris violatores haberet? illos saltem avo et rei publicae redderet. diu cunctatus aspernantem uxorem, cum se divo Augusto ortam neque degenerem ad pericula testaretur, postremo uterum eius et communem filium multo cum fletu complexus, ut abiret perpulit.**<sup>17</sup>

The first sentence in this quotation is loaded with emotion; **filium parvulum**, with the particular emphasis of the use of the diminutive, and **gravidem coniugem** are calculated to melt the hardest heart, and to paint the most pathetic picture of Agrippina and her child, forced to flee by the mutinous soldiery. It is interesting to note the pairing of **avo** and **rei publicae** in the following sentence. This pairing is another instance of the identification of the emperor with the state; the **avus** here is Augustus, Germanicus' step-grandfather, and the invocation of his memory in connection with the state shows that the two have become inextricably intertwined.

Agrippina's courage and scornful dismissal of danger are qualities associated with the best kind of Roman matron<sup>18</sup>, and her evocation of her illustrious ancestry, **se divo Augusto ortam**, would strike a chord in every Roman reader's heart. It is all the more effective for the contrast with Germanicus' tearful plea to his family to flee - **multo cum fletu complexus**. This is not the only occasion<sup>19</sup> where Tacitus contrasts a strong female character with a weaker male one, who may be shamed into bolder behaviour as a result. Benario<sup>20</sup> comments on this contrast between the two thus:

"The importance of Agrippina, a woman of character almost stronger than a man's, is already evident in this context when her departure from the camp with the young Gaius is, above all, the act which brings the maddened soldiers to their senses. In general she seems to be much more hard-headed than Germanicus who is presented as somewhat of a romantic." Nonetheless, Agrippina does what a good Roman matron should do, obeys her husband and agrees to leave.

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<sup>17</sup> 1,40

<sup>18</sup> See Pliny 3,16, concerning Arria, and see Appendix for Lucretia, Cloelia and Veturia.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, chapter 8 for Agrippina the younger and Claudius and chapter 10 for Boudicca's speech to her army.

<sup>20</sup> Benario 1975:113 (List B)

In the remainder of this chapter Tacitus exercises all his gifts in presenting a pitiful picture of Agrippina's departure, and thereby manipulating his readers' sympathy for Germanicus' family.

**incedebat muliebre et miserabile agmen, profuga ducis uxor, parvulum sinu filium gerens, lamentantes circum amicorum coniuges quae simul trahebantur nec minus tristes qui manebant.**<sup>21</sup>

The alliteration of **muliebre et miserabile agmen**, along with the connotations of weakness associated with **muliebre**<sup>22</sup>, intensify the emotional nature of the scene. The phrase **muliebre agmen**<sup>23</sup> is almost a contradiction in terms, since **agmen** has distinct military connotations. Livy uses similar phraseology in the episode concerning Veturia and Coriolanus, when he describes the female embassy to Coriolanus' camp as **ingens mulierum agmen**<sup>24</sup>. Since both episodes contrast pitiful women with aggressive soldiery, the echoes are unmistakable. The whole passage is an excellent example of how Tacitus is just as expert at gaining support for people he favours as he is at eliciting opprobrium for those whom he dislikes. Given the characters he is writing about, the occasions for opprobrium come into play more frequently, and one is therefore struck by the antithesis when it occurs.

In the following chapter there is more in the same vein, once more cataloguing Agrippina's noble ancestry and her admirable qualities as a Roman matron. Tacitus does not miss a single opportunity to sing the praises of her ancestry and her character.

**pudor inde et miseratio et patris Agrippae, Augusti avi memoria, socer Drusus, ipsa insigni fecunditate, praeclara pudicitia; iam infans in castris genitus, in contubernio legionum eductus, quem militari vocabulo Caligulam appellabant, quia plerumque ad concilianda vulgi studia eo tegmine pedum induebatur.**<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> 1,40

<sup>22</sup> TLL Vol 8 1568:II,47ff

<sup>23</sup> See also 14,30 where the Britons are described as **muliebre et fanaticum agmen**.

<sup>24</sup> Livy 2,40

<sup>25</sup> 1,41

Tacitus is exploiting the situation to its fullest potential here, with emotive language and images. For the soldiers, the realisation that this is the daughter of Agrippa, who has already been described as **bonum militia et victoriae socium**<sup>26</sup> has particular force. The listing of her male ancestors and connections underlines her importance in the imperial family. In this connection Tacitus also mentions her **fecunditas** and her **praeclara pudicitia**, with the alliteration adding emphasis, qualities absolutely essential in a Roman matron; her fertility has provided heirs for the empire, while her chastity ensures their legitimacy. This looks forward to a passage in Book 2, where the rivalry between the factions supporting Drusus and Germanicus are under discussion, with the introduction of the theme of the hostility of Piso towards Germanicus. The rivalry is widespread enough to include the meddling of the wives of Tiberius and Piso, and the spouses of Drusus and Germanicus are compared in the following words:

**et coniunx Germanici Agrippina fecunditate ac fama Liviam uxorem Drusi praecelebat.**<sup>27</sup>

The reader cannot fail to notice the verbal echo of **fecunditas**, while her **fama** is dependent on her **pudicitia**, and when the same ideas reappear much later in Book 12, in connection with her daughter, Agrippina the younger, they strike chords of recognition. When Agrippina the younger's attributes are being listed for the position of wife to Claudius, here too her fecundity and good character are noted<sup>28</sup>.

The reference to the child, affectionately called Caligula by the troops, is also calculated to add weight to the scales in Agrippina's favour. It is not often that Tacitus reports so favourably on a branch of the Imperial family. Perhaps, as in the case of Britannicus<sup>29</sup>, it is because Germanicus never became emperor, and therefore never had to undertake the ultimate test of his performance in the wielding of absolute power.

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<sup>26</sup> 1,3

<sup>27</sup> 2,43

<sup>28</sup> 12,6, where Vitellius is promoting Agrippina's case in the competition for a wife for Claudius: **nec diu anquirendum quin Agrippina claritudine generis anteiret: datum ab ea fecunditatis experimentum et congruere artes honestas.**

<sup>29</sup> 12,26: **neque enim segnem ei fuisse indolem ferunt, sive verum, seu periculis commendatus retinuit famam sine experimento.**

Later on Agrippina goes further in the tradition of the strong Roman matron as she takes her place as leader of the army when the soldiers are on the point of acting with cowardice.

**ac ni Agrippina inpositum Rheno pontem solvi prohibuisset, erant qui id flagitium formidine auderent. sed femina ingens animi munia ducis per eos dies induit, militibusque, ut quis inops aut saucius, vestem et fomenta dilargita est. tradit C. Plinius, Germanicorum bellorum scriptor, stetisse apud principium ponti laudes et grates reversis legionibus habentem.**<sup>30</sup>

In this passage we have an instance of a woman shaming men<sup>31</sup>, in this case, Roman soldiers, with her superior courage. Tacitus uses the word **femina** in this context because it has more positive connotations than **mulier**<sup>32</sup>, and he goes on to characterise her as **ingens animi**, a rare accolade for a woman. It is a measure of her stature that he says that **munia ducis per eos dies induit**, since in normal circumstances it would be unthinkable for a Roman woman to undertake the duties of a commander. Nevertheless, in this emergency a woman was "the best man for the job" and Tacitus is open in his admiration for her courage and ability. Hallett notes the "...view of upper class Roman **filiae** as fully capable of displaying their father's, and blood family's, unique nature and talents, and often doing so in an impressive manner recognized publicly by outsiders..."<sup>33</sup> and goes on to cite Agrippina the elder as a case in point, describing her as "continuing her father's high-quality service to the **princeps**, and as having inherited her father's gifts for leadership in battle."<sup>34</sup> Agrippina's actions mirror those of her father, Augustus' general, Agrippa. Tiberius does not share this admiration of Agrippina. He is suspicious of Agrippina's actions, as of everything else, and his reaction to her deeds is anything but admiration.

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<sup>30</sup> 1,69

<sup>31</sup> For another instance see also chapter 10 on Boudicca, **Annales** 14, 29-39.

<sup>32</sup> see chapter 4.

<sup>33</sup> Hallett 1984:338 (List B)

<sup>34</sup> Hallett 1984:339 (List B)

**potiorem iam apud exercitus Agrippinam quam legatos, quam duces; compressam a muliere seditionem, cui nomen principis obsistere non quiverit.**<sup>35</sup>

The use here of **mulier** in preference to **femina** is enough to shade the meaning of Tiberius' thoughts towards disapproval. In the previous quotation, where Tacitus is singing Agrippina's praises, he calls her **femina ingens animi**, but when he wants to reflect Tiberius' very jaundiced view of the whole episode, he substitutes **mulier**, and the nuance is quite different. Tiberius is understandably unhappy at the realisation that Agrippina, a woman, manages to defuse a dangerous situation which letters from the emperor had been unable to do. The thought that Agrippina might be

**potiorem iam apud exercitus ... quam legatos, quam duces...**

is very troubling to Tiberius. Bauman comments on this episode as follows: "To apply populist doctrines to the army, in a way that not even Marius or Caesar had dreamed of, was bad enough. But when it was spearheaded by a woman it was more of a shock than if she had stood for the consulship."<sup>36</sup>

An interesting comparison can be drawn between Tacitus' approval of Agrippina's behaviour in relation to the army during a crisis, and his obvious disapproval of Plancina's behaviour in a peacetime situation.

**nec Plancina se intra decora feminis tenebat, sed exercitio equitum, decursibus cohortium interesse, in Agrippinam, in Germanicum contumelias iacere.**<sup>37</sup>

He does not have to spell out what it means to remain **intra decora feminis**, and it is interesting to note the use of **feminis** in conjunction with **decora**; where the virtues of womanhood are concerned, **femina** is always the word of choice. Note too that is permissible, even admirable, for Agrippina to take on a role of command in the army at a critical juncture, but it is not so for Plancina to meddle with the army when carrying out her own little intrigues.

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<sup>35</sup> 1,69

<sup>36</sup> Bauman 1992:140 (List B)

<sup>37</sup> 2,55

The death of Germanicus is another emotional episode which gives Tacitus an opportunity to focus on Agrippina's record as an exemplar of Roman womanhood. But first there is a reference to Plancina, whose plotting has led to Germanicus' death. On his deathbed, Tacitus gives Germanicus a highly emotive speech, in which, among other things, he attributes his death to **fraus muliebris**, in other words, to the machinations of Plancina. It is very interesting to note that this phrase is repeated by Asiaticus in the section dealing with Messalina. Messalina has engineered the suicide of Asiaticus because she coveted his gardens, **inhians hortis**. Immediately prior to his death, Asiaticus says that he would have preferred to have died

**callidate Tiberii vel impetu G. Caesaris....quam fraude muliebri et impudico Vitellii ore...**<sup>38</sup>

Obviously in the Roman mind it is more honourable to die as a result of the intelligence or physical force of a male opponent, than because of the machinations of a woman, who, in default of superior physical force, must of necessity use trickery and deceit.

There is great emphasis on Germanicus the family man, **uno matrimonio, certis liberis**<sup>39</sup> and consequently Agrippina figures largely in his farewell message to his friends.

**ostendite populo Romano divi Augusti neptem eandemque coniugem meam, numerate sex liberos.**<sup>40</sup>

Once again we have her noble birth, and her position as wife to Germanicus and mother to his children under the spotlight. The importance of birth and family connections in the tightly knit society of Rome cannot be too strongly stressed. At this point it is also useful to call to mind the importance of chastity<sup>41</sup> in a wife, so as to ensure the legitimacy of the children of the union. Since paternity (still) cannot be proved beyond doubt, a man's dependence on the fidelity of his wife was total in the matter of legitimate offspring. Germanicus and Agrippina had six children, an unusual number for the time, and

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<sup>38</sup> 11,3

<sup>39</sup> 2,73

<sup>40</sup> 2,71

<sup>41</sup> Treggiari 1991:379 (List B)

Agrippina's reputation for chastity was crucial to their recognition as Germanicus' rightful heirs.

In his farewell to Agrippina, Germanicus begs her to put aside her **ferocia**, which may be translated as spirit or pride. This word recurs later on much more frequently in regard to her daughter, and the following quotation gives some clue to where the said daughter might have inherited the characteristic.

**Tum ad uxorem versus per memoriam sui, per communis liberos oravit exueret ferociam, saevienti fortunae summitteret animum, neu regressa in urbem aemulatione potentiae validiores irritaret.**<sup>42</sup>

**Ferociam**, **animum** and **aemulatio potentiae** all suggest that Germanicus knew that Agrippina, with her forceful character, might well cause trouble for herself back in Rome. **Ferocia** in particular is used with reference to Agrippina the younger<sup>43</sup>, so it is interesting to note that it is used of her mother first.

Tacitus paints a sympathetic and compelling picture of Agrippina as she takes ship after the death of Germanicus. He exploits the situation to its fullest, using the sad and lonely figure of the widow, brought low by fortune, to add to the general dismay at the death of Germanicus.

**At Agrippina, quamquam defessa luctu et corpore aegro, omnium tamen quae ultionem morarentur intolerans ascendit classem cum cineribus Germanici et liberis, miserantibus cunctis quod femina nobilitate princeps, pulcherrimo modo matrimonio inter venerantis gratantisque aspici solita, tunc feralis reliquias sinu ferret, incerta ultionis, anxia sui et infelici fecunditate fortunae totiens obnoxia.**<sup>44</sup>

There are several things worthy of comment in this passage. **Intolerans** tells us that Agrippina is not a feeble character. **Intolerans** is defined as impatient and intolerant<sup>45</sup>, and

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<sup>42</sup> 2,72

<sup>43</sup> 13,2 and 13,21

<sup>44</sup> 2,75

<sup>45</sup> L&S s.v. **intolerans** I

**impatiens** is given as a synonym. There have been previous mentions of her strong personality, and the use of **intolerans** in this context shows that even when bowed down with grief, she retains her innate fortitude. Nonetheless, Agrippina's situation changes drastically upon her widowhood. McDougall characterises the reversal vividly when he says, "Agrippina's role hereafter is passive as she becomes the victim of hostile forces rather than the predator."<sup>46</sup> Tacitus also knows that there is nothing more guaranteed to catch and keep his readers' attention than the depiction of the mighty brought low. None of Agrippina's material advantages is of any use against death and grief; neither her noble birth, her noble marriage nor the respect and adulation she was accustomed to, can help her now. There are echoes of the scene in Germany when she left the mutinous camp, clasping her baby to her breast<sup>47</sup>, on this occasion too, but this time she is clutching the ashes of her husband. Even her much vaunted fertility has become a burden, as her six children are just so many hostages to fortune. Now it is characterised as **infelici fecunditate**, whereas before it has been **insigni fecunditate**<sup>48</sup>.

Germanicus has been the foil to Tiberius in this portion of the Annals, and Tacitus takes the opportunity to underline the tragedy of his premature death by chronicling Agrippina's journey back to Rome with his ashes in some detail, extracting from his readers every ounce of pity and sympathy that he can. Her landing at Brundisium, which serves as the opening to Book 3, is greeted by crowds of mourners, and a pall of gloom envelops the scene. Agrippina herself is the centrepiece.

**postquam duobus cum liberis, feralem urnam tenens, egressa navi defixit oculos, idem omnium gemitus.**<sup>49</sup>

The widespread grief at the death of Germanicus, and sympathy for his widow does not please Tiberius, who is conspicuous by his absence from the crowd that meets Agrippina.

<sup>46</sup> McDougall 1981:106 (List A)

<sup>47</sup> 1,40; cf. also the sorrowing crowds, **lamentantes circum amicorum coniuges** (1,40) and **miserantibus cunctis** (2,75); also the note taken of her status in **ducis uxor** (1,40) and **femina nobilitate princeps** (2,75).

<sup>48</sup> 1,41

<sup>49</sup> 3,1

Tacitus uses one of his favourite techniques at this point, when he gives alternative reasons<sup>50</sup> for the non-appearance of Tiberius and the Augusta. Of the alternatives, the second is less flattering, and because it is given second, it lingers in the reader's mind longer, and one cannot help feeling that it is the one that Tacitus favours.

**Tiberius atque Augusta publico abstinere, inferius maiestate sua rati si palam lamentarentur, an ne omnium oculis vultum eorum scrutantibus falsi intellegentur.**<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, Tacitus even indulges in a moment of infrequent personal comment on this very topic when speculating on the reason for the absence of Germanicus' mother from the ceremonies.

**Facilius crediderim Tiberio et Augusta, qui domo non excedebant, cohibitam, ut par maeror et matris exemplo avia quoque et patruus attineri viderentur.**<sup>52</sup>

The public adulation shown to Agrippina does not find favour with Tiberius, and no doubt increases his dislike for her<sup>53</sup>.

**nihil tamen Tiberium magis penetravit quam studia hominum accensa in Agrippinam, cum decus patriae, solum Augusti sanguinem, unicum antiquitatis specimen appellarent versique ad caelum ac deos integram illi subolem ac superstitem iniquorum precarentur.**<sup>54</sup>

**Decus patriae** and the other laudatory epithets given by the crowds to Agrippina are full of significance for the Roman mind, and the mood depicted comes dangerously close to sedition<sup>55</sup>.

The phrase **solum Augusti sanguinem** is indicative of just how far the principate had become transformed into a hereditary monarchy, when the importance of descent is emphasised in this manner. One must not forget that Tiberius is not Augustus' natural son,

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<sup>50</sup> Develin 1983:64

<sup>51</sup> 3,3

<sup>52</sup> 3,3

<sup>53</sup> Walker 1968:125 (List B)

<sup>54</sup> 3,4

<sup>55</sup> Bauman 1992:142 (List B)

and references like this to Augustus' natural successors accentuate the possibility that they may act as a focus for disaffection.

**Unicum** in the following phrase is a synonym for **solum**, and the repetition of the word order, with the genitive sandwiched between the adjective and the noun to which it refers, lends the phrases an incantatory element. Tacitus' choice of words leads the reader to believe that Tiberius has good reason to worry.

The unhappy position of Germanicus' family is referred to again after the death of Piso, and the subsequent defence of Plancina by Tiberius.

**quod pro omnibus civibus leges obtineant uni Germanico non contigisse. Vitellii et Veranii voce deflectum Caesarem, ab imperatore et Augusta defensam Plancinam. proinde venena et artes tam feliciter expertas verteret in Agrippinam, in liberos eius, egregiamque aviam ac patruum sanguine miserrimae exsatiaret.**<sup>56</sup>

**Omnibus** and **uni** balance and contrast with each other in the first sentence, each highlighting the other. In the next sentence **Vitellius** and **Veranius** do the same with **imperator** and **Augusta**, accentuating the difference between the treatment meted out to Germanicus, and the support given to Plancina. **Feliciter** is highly ironical, as is **egregiam aviam**.

Agrippina does not appear again until the death of Tiberius' son, Drusus, when her children came under the spotlight again. They are the last descendants of Augustus and as such are the legitimate heirs to the empire. Tacitus explicitly mentions Agrippina's ambitions for her sons at this point:

**quod principium favoris et mater Agrippina spem male tegens perniciem adceleravere.**<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> 3,17

<sup>57</sup> 4,12

It is Sejanus who is the villain of the piece at this stage; he has orchestrated the poisoning of Drusus, and with the revival of the fortunes and popularity of the house of Germanicus he sets about encompassing their downfall too<sup>58</sup>.

**...volutare secum quonam modo Germanici liberos perverteret, quorum non dubia successio.**<sup>59</sup>

The force of character that has been noticeable in Agrippina previously now begins to work against her. She is still the model of Roman womanhood, indeed her virtue, **pudicitia Agrippinae impenetrabili**<sup>60</sup>, is a stumbling block to Sejanus' plans, since he cannot attack her on that score, but her strong personality has made her important enemies, among them the Augusta, and this **vetus Augustae odium**<sup>61</sup> provides Sejanus with allies. He incites various women to inform Tiberius that she has designs on the throne, and Tacitus uses words here that have other reverberations or echoes. Tiberius is told that she is **superbam fecunditate**<sup>62</sup>, an attribute of hers that has been mentioned several times before, with varying qualifying adjectives<sup>63</sup>. Her fertility has been both a blessing and a curse to her, and features frequently in the narrative. Tacitus also uses a word here which features again in the narration concerning Messalina and Agrippina the younger. Agrippina the elder is said **inhiare dominationi**<sup>64</sup>, a phrase which will spring to mind when the reader finds Messalina and Agrippina the younger described as **inhians hortis**<sup>65</sup> later. Since the word **inhians** links all three episodes, it seems fair to assume that Tacitus meant the reader to weigh up the various objects desired, for which at least Messalina and Agrippina the younger indirectly committed murder. The inescapable conclusion is that Agrippina the elder, who did not in fact commit murder to achieve her

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<sup>58</sup> Walker 1968:103 (List B)

<sup>59</sup> 4,12

<sup>60</sup> 4,12

<sup>61</sup> 4,12

<sup>62</sup> 4,12

<sup>63</sup> For example, **insigni fecunditate** (1,41) and **infelici fecunditate** (2,75)

<sup>64</sup> 4,12

<sup>65</sup> 11,1

desires, had far more cogent reason for doing so. To commit murder for the sake of possessing some gardens seems to be a distinct abuse of power.

Sejanus carries on the feud with Agrippina, taking every opportunity to encourage Tiberius' enmity towards her. He speaks of Agrippina's party<sup>66</sup>, which, he says, threatens to split Rome through civil war. Bauman comments on this phrase, saying, "**Partes Agrippinae** is the most explicitly political label attached to any woman so far; it is matched only by what Tacitus will say about her daughter, Agrippina the younger."<sup>67</sup> After an examination of the available evidence, Bauman comes to the conclusion that the **partes Agrippinae** was an alliance, not against Tiberius, but against Sejanus, who, as we have seen above, mounts a campaign to destroy Agrippina and her family, using every means at his disposal. When he comes to ask Tiberius for the hand of Livilla in marriage, he again mentions the ill-feeling that Agrippina shows towards him<sup>68</sup>.

One of Agrippina's last appearances in person, in the text that we have extant, comes as a result of the trial of her second cousin, Claudia Pulchra. This trial, according to Tacitus, is the first in a series of events destined to lead to Agrippina's downfall<sup>69</sup>. It is in this passage we find the famous phrase, **Agrippina semper atrox**, which Tacitus uses again, with a slight change, to describe Agrippina the younger<sup>70</sup>. Although Agrippina the elder is portrayed as a very strong character by Tacitus, and no doubt her family connections would always make her a focus for opposition to Tiberius, she does not, in my opinion, approach her daughter in cruelty and ambition. She does frequently use her descent from Augustus as a weapon, as she does in this passage, when she confronts Tiberius on behalf of Claudia Pulchra.

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<sup>66</sup> 4,17

<sup>67</sup> Baumann 1992:145 (List B)

<sup>68</sup> 4,39

<sup>69</sup> 4,52

<sup>70</sup> 13,13: **...orabantque cavere insidias mulieris semper atrocis, tum et falsae.**

**quo initio invidiae non eiusdem ait mactare divo Augusto victimas et posteros eius insectari. non in effigies mutas divinum spiritum transfusum: se imaginem veram, caelesti sanguine ortam...**<sup>71</sup>

This is a foolish outburst, more than anything else, since it is guaranteed to incense Tiberius, and to strengthen his belief that she is a danger to him. It is very emotive and adds to the impression that she has a volatile personality, quite unlike her controlled, calculating and much more analytical daughter. The phrase **Agrippina semper atrox** is quoted by Lewis & Short, and the translation "always gloomy" is given, and in view of Agrippina's life since the death of Germanicus, that is fair comment. However, the general translation given for this word includes "savage, cruel, harsh, severe and unyielding"<sup>72</sup>, all of which apply more appropriately to Agrippina the younger.

Tacitus records an incident, which he says he found in Agrippina the younger's memoirs, which unfortunately are lost to us, in which Agrippina the elder asks Tiberius to give her a husband. She does not, in Tacitus' account, seem to understand fully the political implications of her request<sup>73</sup>, and in this too she is quite unlike her daughter. She couches the request in purely personal terms, citing her loneliness since Germanicus' death and the fact that for a Roman woman, marriage is the only respectable consolation.

**...neque aliud probis quam ex matrimonio solacium;**<sup>74</sup>

These are the sentiments of a woman who has been held up as an exemplar of Roman womanhood, and who has been steeped in those values all her life. Her daughter would have dealt with the situation very differently, with an acute grasp of the political implications. McDougall comments on this passage in similar terms, although he does not view the **partes Agrippinae** in the same light as Bauman:

"While this passage seems to confirm that Agrippina had no political group on which to depend, it also suggests that Agrippina's motive in seeking a husband was to relieve herself

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<sup>71</sup> 4,52

<sup>72</sup> L&S s.v. **atrox**

<sup>73</sup> See Rawson 1986:31-32 (List B) for a view which explores the implications of this incident which, in Tacitus' account, Agrippina does not seem to appreciate fully.

<sup>74</sup> 4,53

of the **viriles curae** which she assumed on Germanicus' death. For Tacitus she may have played her role well, but she was not comfortable doing so."<sup>75</sup>

Agrippina is warned that there are schemes afoot to poison her and that she should avoid dining with Tiberius. Here Tacitus uses a phrase he could never have used of Agrippina the younger,

**atque illa simulatione nescia...**<sup>76</sup>,

and adds to the picture of a persecuted woman, who is unable to deal with the situation, again totally unlike her daughter, who, time and again, manages to turn seeming defeat into victory.

When Tiberius retires to Capri, Sejanus continues his feud with Agrippina, moving against her and her family at every opportunity. Eventually, after the death of the Augusta, Agrippina and Nero Caesar are denounced, Agrippina for what is termed

**...adrogantium oris et contumacem animum...**<sup>77</sup>.

We know from other sources<sup>78</sup> that she was exiled to an island as were her two sons, Nero Caesar and Drusus Caesar, Agrippina the younger's brothers. Suetonius tells us<sup>79</sup> that after exiling Agrippina to the prison island of Pandateria, Tiberius ordered a centurion to give her a good flogging, in punishment for her violent protests, and in the course of this she lost one eye. She finally succeeded in starving herself to death in AD 33, having lost all hope when even Sejanus' death did not bring any change to her circumstances. Tacitus uses this opportunity to slip in another remark against Tiberius when he says

**Nondum is dolor exoleverat, cum de Agrippina auditum, quam interfecto Seiano spe sustentam provixisse reor, et postquam nihil de saevitia remittebatur, voluntate**

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<sup>75</sup> McDougall 1981:107 (List A)

<sup>76</sup> 4,54

<sup>77</sup> 5,3

<sup>78</sup> Suetonius: Tiberius 53-54

<sup>79</sup> Suetonius: Tiberius 53,2....**Pandateriam relegavit conviciantique oculum per centurionem verberibus excussit.**

**extinctam, nisi si negatis alimentis adsimulatus est finis qui videretur sponte sumptus.**<sup>80</sup>

Reviewing Tacitus' account of Agrippina the elder, particularly in the light of that of her daughter, very distinct differences are readily apparent. In chapters eight and nine I will discuss the very masculine characteristics of the younger Agrippina; in reading about her mother, it quickly becomes apparent that although she too is a strong personality, she is more conventionally feminine, in the Roman sense of the term. To quote McDougall again, "It seems clear from Tacitus' account that there was a tradition which, rightly or wrongly, represented Agrippina bearing characteristics which are not at first sight attractive and suggest that she may not have played as passive a role as Tacitus has her play. No matter whether this tradition reveals the real Agrippina or presents her as her enemies wished her to be seen, the traces are to be found in Tacitus, although he gives much more attention to her matronly virtues..."<sup>81</sup> She is emotional as well as strong-minded, and the strains of her life as a widow take their toll. In her request to Tiberius to give her a husband, she intimates that she would prefer to be under the protection of a man; for her the conventional role of a wife is more congenial. One does not feel this about her daughter. Agrippina the elder does not plot and plan in the way that her daughter does, and she does not desire political power either. All in all, the epithet **dominandi avida** seems to suit the daughter far better than the mother.

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<sup>80</sup> 6,25

<sup>81</sup> McDougall 1981:106 (List A). Bauman 1992:156 (List B) takes a diametrically opposing view when he says: "We are therefore inclined to think that Agrippina's name was given to the group not only for its propaganda value, but also because she was the driving force. Tacitus is saying something very important when he stresses her **atrocitas**, her greed for power, her unfeminine preoccupation with masculine concerns.(6,25,3). The elder Agrippina's mother had headed a **grex**. She did not adopt her mother's methods, but she did inherit the idea of a woman heading a political group. If any Roman woman was a politician in her own right, it was the elder Agrippina." I should say at this point that Bauman's book did not come to hand until the final stages of the writing of this thesis, and my original reaction to the narrative concerning Agrippina the elder was closer to McDougall's reading referred to above.

## CHAPTER 7: MESSALINA

In the gallery of powerful women that we find in Tacitus' *Annals*, Messalina provides a contrast to the two that we have already met, Livia and Agrippina the elder. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that her complete story does not survive in our manuscripts, but there is enough extant for us to appreciate the fact that Tacitus painted her as an individual, differentiating her very clearly and successfully from Agrippina the younger and Poppaea Sabina, the other two in the trio of evil women<sup>1</sup> in Books 11-16. Although the three women have some characteristics in common, for example, a lust for power, each one is carefully depicted as an individual and not merely as an example of the rhetorical schools' stock character of the Female Intriguer<sup>2</sup>.

Messalina was the great-granddaughter of Octavia, sister of Augustus, and by the time our manuscript begins again after the gap following the death of Tiberius in Book 6, she is married to her cousin Claudius, who is now emperor after the death of Gaius. They have two children, Britannicus and Octavia, who feature in the ensuing narrative as victims of the intrigue that pervades the imperial court. It is frustrating not to know whether Tacitus provided an introductory passage on Messalina at her first appearance in the narrative or not. He does so later on for another of his evil women, Poppaea Sabina, which I shall comment on in the chapter concerning her, but he does not appear to do so for the third in this infamous trio, Agrippina the younger<sup>3</sup>. In her case he allows her actions to speak for her, and intersperses his authorial comment on her throughout the relevant narrative. A comparative reading of Suetonius and Dio Cassius on Messalina is interesting. Suetonius, in fact, spends very little time on Messalina<sup>4</sup>, which is surprising, given the ample evidence of her debauchery<sup>5</sup>. Dio, on the other hand, mentions Messalina frequently, although his

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<sup>1</sup> See Walker 1968:24 (List B)

<sup>2</sup> Walker 1968:152 (List B). Walker discusses the effect of Tacitus' rhetorical training on his writing, and in this connection cites the Female Intriguer as one of the stock characters of the rhetorical schools' exercises.

<sup>3</sup> It is possible that there was some sort of introduction of Agrippina the younger in the missing portion of the text dealing with the reign of Gaius.

<sup>4</sup> Suetonius: Claudius, 26

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Juvenal 6, 115-132.

account is far less vivid than that of Tacitus. I shall refer to it where the comparison with Tacitus is apposite<sup>6</sup>.

The first episode concerning Messalina in our surviving manuscript is one which typifies her admirably. The episode concerns Messalina's covetous desire for the gardens of Valerius Asiaticus, whom she believes to have been the lover of Poppaea Sabina, a wealthy and fashionable beauty of whom Messalina is jealous, and whose daughter later becomes Nero's second wife. The object of Messalina's desire serves only to illuminate the portrait of her character that Tacitus is painting. The gardens in question are a symbol of extreme luxury<sup>7</sup>, which only the very wealthy can afford, and the covetousness of Messalina for them illustrates her continual seeking after new pleasures. Syme comments on this aspect as follows:

"Wealth did not always bring contentment or abate rapacity. Valeria Messalina, with other reasons for bringing Asiaticus to ruin, was open-mouthed in greed for the gardens that had belonged to Lucullus(11.1.1)."<sup>8</sup>

This tendency of Messalina to be seized by a whim which must be gratified immediately, whatever the cost, is the essence of her character. I have commented in an earlier chapter on Tacitus' use in this context of the word **inhians**<sup>9</sup> to describe Messalina's sudden longing for the gardens of Asiaticus, and the reverberations it has when he uses it later in connection with Agrippina.

Messalina's capacity to plan and execute a course of action in order to have her desires fulfilled is overshadowed perhaps only by that of Agrippina; the two women differ solely in the nature of the desires which motivate them. In the episode concerning Asiaticus' gardens, Messalina has her henchman prosecute Asiaticus, having already arranged for Sosibius, Britannicus' tutor, to turn Claudius against Asiaticus. The whole passage is

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<sup>6</sup> See below, referring to Dio's account of the death of Asiaticus.

<sup>7</sup> Carcopino 1941:33,39 (List B)

<sup>8</sup> Syme 1981:48 (list A)

<sup>9</sup> See chapter 4. See also use of **inhicare** in chapter 6.

suffused with irony at the extreme measures taken against Asiaticus, not because of any wrongdoing on his part, but because he has something that Messalina wants. Claudius sends soldiers **tamquam opprimendo bello**<sup>10</sup> to arrest one man, and when he has been seized, he is taken to Rome, **vinclis inditis**<sup>11</sup>. The irregularity of the affair continues, with the examination taking place **intra cubiculum**<sup>12</sup>, on a series of trumped up charges. The amoral nature of Messalina is epitomised in her reaction to Asiaticus' moving defence.

**...Messalinae quoque lacrimas excivit. quibus abluendis cubiculo egrediens monet Vitellium ne elabi reum sineret: ipsa ad perniciem Poppaeae festinat...**<sup>13</sup>

There is no need for authorial comment of any kind; Messalina's actions speak louder than words concerning her capricious but ruthless abuse of power and feminine wiles.

Asiaticus' preparations for, and the manner of his death stand in stark contrast to the self-serving, self-indulgent actions of Messalina.

**...cum se honestius callidate Tiberii vel impetu G. Caesaris perituum dixisset quam quod fraude muliebri et impudico Vitellii ore caderet, venas exolvit, viso tamen antero iussoque transferre partem in aliam ne opacitas arborum vapore ignis minueretur: tantum illi securitatis novissimae fuit.**<sup>14</sup>

**Fraude muliebri** is an interesting phrase here. I have commented in an earlier chapter<sup>15</sup> on the use of **muliebris** in a disparaging sense, and its use in this sentence, in an unfavourable comparison with **callidate Tiberii vel impetu G. Caesaris**, gives an indication of the shade of meaning that Tacitus intends.

While considering this episode, which Tacitus recounts in detail, it is also interesting to note that Dio treats the incident in a different manner altogether<sup>16</sup>. Dio's account of Messalina has survived more completely than Tacitus', and he records Messalina's use of

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<sup>10</sup> 11,1.

<sup>11</sup> 11,1

<sup>12</sup> 11,2.

<sup>13</sup> 11,2

<sup>14</sup> 11,3

<sup>15</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>16</sup> Dio:60,29,6a

the criminal courts to achieve her ends. Bauman says that her manipulation of the criminal law, "coupled with the judicious use of sex, was to be her principal weapon in the game of politics. The combination evolved by '**Partes Messalinae**' was unique."<sup>17</sup> After examining Messalina's prosecution of various people, including Livilla, (Caligula's sister), Appius Iunius Claudius (her mother's third husband), the members of Scribonianus' conspiracy, including A. Caecina Paetus, and one of the praetorian prefects, Catonius Justus, Bauman goes on to say, "In a certain sense, she was Claudius' Sejanus, searching out his enemies and destroying them."<sup>18</sup>

In Dio's narrative there is no mention of Messalina's desire for Asiaticus' gardens; instead Dio says that Claudius was informed that some people were plotting against him, and that he paid no attention to most of them. Asiaticus was, nonetheless, tried before Claudius, and was on the point of acquittal when the intervention of Vitellius caused Claudius to believe that Asiaticus had condemned himself because of a guilty conscience, and he was therefore put to death. The only mention of Messalina is the comment that Vitellius' intervention was made as a favour to her, and there is no description of Asiaticus' suicide.

The divergences between the two accounts make it clear that Tacitus intentionally uses the episode to highlight the character of Messalina, and finds in the noble suicide of Asiaticus just the foil he needs to emphasise Messalina's concupiscence. Likewise, the noble death of Asiaticus provides a contrast with the despicable death of his persecutor, Messalina, at the end of Book 11<sup>19</sup>.

There is an interesting juxtaposition of Messalina and Agrippina the younger some chapters later. At this point in their respective careers, Messalina is at the height of her power, while Agrippina is as yet a minor character, her personality as yet unknown. Her claim to fame is her position as the daughter of Germanicus, the darling of the Roman

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<sup>17</sup> Bauman 1992:168 (List B)

<sup>18</sup> Bauman 1922:171 (List B)

<sup>19</sup> 11,38

people, and the mother of Germanicus' only surviving male descendant, later to be known as Nero. Since Claudius has a son of his own, Britannicus, Agrippina and her son are at this stage important only as members of the imperial family as a whole. This accounts for the irony of Tacitus' comment about the effect of Messalina's persecution of Agrippina:

**et matri Agrippinae miseratio augebatur ob saevitiam Messalinae, quae semper infesta et tunc commotior quo minus strueret crimina et accusatores novo et furori proximo amore distinebatur.**<sup>20</sup>

It is an unusual picture of Agrippina as an object of pity, but an altogether familiar one of Messalina in the grip of an overpowering but transient desire for new sensations.

Tacitus uses the metaphor of fire to illustrate the fierceness of her passion for Silius:

**nam in C Silium, iuventutis Romanae pulcherrimum, ita exarserat ut Iuniam Silanam, nobilem feminam, matrimonio eius exturbaret vacuoque adultero poteretur.**<sup>21</sup>

The use of **exardescere** here is twofold; it is used as a metaphor for burning passion, and as a reference point when it is used later in the narrative to describe Claudius' ardour towards Agrippina.

**haud multo post flagitia uxoris noscere ac punire adactus est ut deinde ardesceret in nuptias incestas.**<sup>22</sup>

Although fire is often used as a metaphor for passion in Latin literature, for example by Ovid, Catullus and Vergil<sup>23</sup>, I found in the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae<sup>24</sup> that the verb **ardescere** is used more often in connection with rage and avarice than with passion. The only example given in association with love is Lucretius 5, 897. The fact that Tacitus uses it twice as a metaphor for passion is unusual and therefore noteworthy.

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<sup>20</sup> 11,12.

<sup>21</sup> 11,12

<sup>22</sup> 11,25. See also chapter 8.

<sup>23</sup> For example: Ovid *Metamorphoses* 2,410; *Fasti* 2,761-2, Catullus 45, 15-16; 51, 9-10 and Vergil *Aeneid* 4,66 ff.

<sup>24</sup> TLL Vol 2 488,54-489,11.

Tacitus' description of Iunia Silana in the quotation above as **nobilis femina, nobilis** meaning aristocratic or highborn, fits in with my earlier contention<sup>25</sup> that **femina** is the word of choice when Tacitus is referring to a woman worthy of respect and admiration. It also shows that Messalina pays no heed to the social position of her rival in her headlong rush to fulfil her desires. Indeed Tacitus goes on to describe her behaviour in terms that highlight her total dedication to her own pleasure, with no thought of the consequences.

**illa non furtim sed multo comitatu ventitare domum, egressibus adhaerescere, largiri opes honores;...**<sup>26</sup>

This list of historic infinitives adds to the immediacy of the description and mirrors Messalina's concern with her present gratification. At this stage Claudius is still **matrimonii sui ignarus**<sup>27</sup> and Messalina is able to indulge herself, so Tacitus takes the opportunity to add variety to the work as a whole by turning to other subjects for some considerable time before resuming the story of Messalina and her eventual fall.

Finally, however, even Claudius cannot remain in ignorance forever, so shameless is Messalina's conduct.

**isque illi finis inscitiae erga domum suam fuit:...**<sup>28</sup>

Messalina's reaction to Silius' urgings to have done with secrecy is typical of her character. She is not held back by love for Claudius, but by fear of Silius' possible future rejection of her. Nevertheless, she is won over to his plan by her insatiable desire for novelty and sensation.

**nomen tamen matrimonii concupivit ob magnitudinem infamiae cuius apud prodigos novissima voluptas est.**<sup>29</sup>

**Infamia** is one of the words Tacitus uses to describe Messalina's misdeeds. I have shown previously<sup>30</sup> that his choice of words to describe Agrippina the younger's crimes is quite

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<sup>25</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>26</sup> 11,12

<sup>27</sup> 11,13

<sup>28</sup> 11,25

<sup>29</sup> 11,26

<sup>30</sup> See chapter 4.

different and seems to signal a qualitative difference in the behaviour and motivation of the two women. One cannot imagine Agrippina doing anything **ob magnitudinem infamiae**, but the phrase captures Messalina's continual search for novelty and excitement.

After considerable discussion of the possible motives behind the marriage of Messalina and Silius, Bauman comes to the conclusion that boredom and a desire for novelty are Messalina's chief motivations for the marriage and the subsequent Bacchic festival:

"The vintage festival has no point except in that context; it typifies the new excitements to which boredom had propelled Messalina. Tacitus has told us, then, what he considers the key to the whole affair. There is not sufficient reason to disagree with him."<sup>31</sup>

Even Tacitus himself feels constrained to add some authorial comment to the recounting of Messalina's mock marriage to Silius, because he realises that his readers will find it difficult to believe. The use of the verb in the first person twice in one chapter<sup>32</sup>, in the phrases **haud sum ignarus** and **verum audita scriptaque senioribus tradam**, testifies to the enormity of Messalina's conduct<sup>33</sup>. The recitation of the elements of the Roman marriage ceremony adds to the sense of disbelief felt by the reader because of the way in which Messalina and Silius actually pervert the ceremony through their actions<sup>34</sup>:

**nedum consulem designatum cum uxore principis, praedicta die, adhibitis qui obsignarent, velut suscipiendorum liberorum causa convenisse, atque illam audisse auspicum verba, subisse, sacrificasse apud deos:...** <sup>35</sup>

The phrase **uxore principis** jolts the reader into realising that this is not a normal marriage ceremony, despite all its customary trappings. Dio's account of the marriage with Silius is much less vivid, and does not employ the elements of the marriage ceremony. He does, however, attribute Messalina's fall to the loss of the support of the imperial freedmen<sup>36</sup>,

<sup>31</sup> Bauman 1992:178-179 (List B)

<sup>32</sup> 11,27

<sup>33</sup> Martin 1981:150 (List B)

<sup>34</sup> See Treggiari 1991:169 (List B) for Tacitus and Juvenal on the elements of the wedding ceremony undergone by Messalina and Silius.

<sup>35</sup> 11,27

<sup>36</sup> See Levick 1990:64 (List B)

because she has caused the downfall and death of Polybius, while Tacitus implies that the marriage itself provoked the opposition of the freedmen, who felt threatened by its implications for themselves. More akin to Tacitus' account is that of Juvenal in the tenth satire<sup>37</sup>, although he describes Messalina as the driving force behind the marriage, whereas Tacitus says that the original idea came from Silius himself.

.....**elige quidnam**  
**suadendum esse putes cui nubere Caesaris uxor**  
**destinat. optimus hic et formosissimus idem**  
**gentis patriciae rapitur miser exstinguendus**  
**Messalinae oculis; dudum sedet illa parato**  
**flammeolo Tyriusque palam genialis in hortis**  
**sternitur et ritu decies centena dabuntur**  
**antiquo, veniet cum signatoribus auspex.**  
**haec tu secreta et paucis commissa putabas?**  
**non nisi legitime volt nubere. quid placeat dic.**  
**ni parere velis, pereundum erit ante lucernas;**  
**si scelus admittas, dabitur mora parvula, dum res**  
**nota urbi et populo contingat principis aurem.**  
**dedecus ille domus sciet ultimus. interea tu**  
**obsequere imperio, si tanti vita dierum**  
**paucorum. quidquid levius meliusque putaris,**  
**praebenda est gladio pulchra haec et candida cervix.**

The imperial household, in reality the powerful imperial freedmen, understands immediately the implications that the marriage could have. Long familiar with personal ambition, they realise that Silius could turn the situation to his advantage, if they do not act quickly enough, since Silius is the complete opposite of Claudius:

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<sup>37</sup> Juvenal Sat. 10, 329-345

**nunc iuvenem nobilem dignitate formae, vi mentis ac propinquo consulatu maiorem ad spem accingi.**<sup>38</sup>

Claudius, on the other hand, is described as **hebetem Claudium et uxori devinctum.**<sup>39</sup> I have noted earlier<sup>40</sup> other instances of the verb **devincire**, which is found on several occasions to describe the influence of strong and powerful women over their menfolk. The strength of Messalina's influence over Claudius is apparent even at this late stage, and is demonstrated by the freedmen's anxiety over Claudius' ability to resist her if she is given an opportunity to defend herself:

**sed in eo discrimen verti, si defensio audiretur, utque clausae aures etiam confitenti forent.**<sup>41</sup>

While the freedmen inform Claudius of the enormity of the outrage that Messalina has committed, inciting him against her by skilfully playing on his greatest fears, Messalina is indulging her fantasies even further.

**at Messalina non alias solutior luxu, adulto autumnno simulacrum vindemiae per domum celebrabat.**<sup>42</sup>

The occasion is described in terms of Bacchic frenzy, showing just how depraved Messalina has become. It is interesting to note that the scene has affinities with the one that greets Suetonius Paulinus on his arrival on Mona, just prior to the rebellion of the Iceni, but the atmosphere is very different<sup>43</sup>. The British women are defending their way of life against an alien invader; Messalina and her followers are depraved and self-indulgent, participants in the decline of Rome.

**...et feminae pellibus accinctae adsultabant ut sacrificantes vel insanientes Bacchae; ipsa crine fluxo thyrsus quatiens...**<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> 11,28

<sup>39</sup> 11,28

<sup>40</sup> See also chapter 5.

<sup>41</sup> 11,28

<sup>42</sup> 11,31

<sup>43</sup> 14,30

<sup>44</sup> 11,31

This is more of a Bacchic revel than the British example, where it is an image only. The picture is completed with the description of Silius taking part in the celebration:

**... iuxtaque Silius hedera vinctus, gerere cothurnos, iacere caput, strepente circum procaci choro.**<sup>45</sup>

When the news comes that Claudius is at last aware of the situation and is bent on revenge, Messalina takes refuge in the gardens of Lucullus that she had acquired after arranging the death of Asiaticus. The irony of the situation is not lost on the reader. Her partners in debauchery slip away, **ceteris passim dilabentibus**<sup>46</sup>, as might be expected, but are caught nonetheless.

Messalina is now alone but feels that she still has her trump card to play.

**Messalina tamen, quamquam res adversae consilium eximerent, ire obviam et aspici a marito, quod saepe subsidium habuerat, haud segniter intendit...**<sup>47</sup>

She calls in all the reinforcements she can muster, her children, Britannicus and Octavia, and Vibidia, the most senior Vestal Virgin, in order to plead her cause, since now she is deserted except for three companions. The suddenness of her isolation foreshadows that of Agrippina the younger later on, when she too finds herself deserted by her erstwhile companions<sup>48</sup>.

For Messalina too the isolation is sudden; Tacitus uses **repente** instead of **statim**, but the effect is the same.

**atque interim, tribus omnino comitatibus - id repente solitudinis erat - spatium urbis pedibus emensa, vehiculo, quo purgamenta hortorum eripiuntur, Ostiensem viam intrat.**<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> 11,31

<sup>46</sup> 11,32

<sup>47</sup> 11,32

<sup>48</sup> 13,19, where Tacitus says "**statim relictum Agrippinae limen: nemo solari, nemo adire praeter paucas feminas, amore an odio incertas**". See too Agrippina's isolation just prior to her murder, 14,8: "**cui pauci adstabant, ceteris terrore inrumpentium exterritis. cubiculo modicum lumen inerat et ancillarum una...**"

<sup>49</sup> 11,32

There is irony, too, in the mention of the cart in which Messalina travels the Ostia road<sup>50</sup>, since it is the antithesis of the cart which is later granted to Agrippina as a mark of respect when she is at the height of her power<sup>51</sup>, the same Agrippina whom Messalina has hitherto treated with *saevitia*. We also know from Suetonius<sup>52</sup> that Messalina had been awarded a ceremonial carriage by the Senate on the occasion of Claudius' British triumph; Tacitus may have reported this in the missing portion of the Annals, in which case the irony would not be lost on the reader. Messalina now reaps what she has sown; just as she felt no pity for her victims, no one feels any pity for her either:

**nulla cuiusquam misericordia quia flagitiorum deformitas praevalebat.**<sup>53</sup>

Although she tries to win Claudius over by trading on her position as the mother of Britannicus and Octavia, Messalina is no match for the determined efforts of Narcissus to keep her crimes in the forefront of Claudius' mind. In fact, Narcissus takes complete charge of the situation<sup>54</sup>, and whereas Messalina might have been able to secure her position with Claudius, she has no chance with Narcissus. He organises the trials and sentences of all involved in Messalina's iniquities, including one unfortunate victim of Messalina's capriciousness.

**ne Trauli quidem Montani equitis Romani defensio recepta est. is modesta iuventa, sed corpore insigni, accitus ultro noctemque intra unam a Messalina proturbatus erat, paribus lasciviis ad cupidinem et fastidia.**<sup>55</sup>

Tacitus comments on Messalina's arrogance as she composes an appeal to Claudius in the gardens of Lucullus where she has retreated:

**non nulla spe et aliquando ira: tantum inter extrema superbiae gerebat.**<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See Henderson 1989:170 (List A) on Messalina's utter degradation at this point.

<sup>51</sup> 12,42

<sup>52</sup> Suetonius: Claudius 17,3

<sup>53</sup> 11,32

<sup>54</sup> See Levick 1990:67 (List B)

<sup>55</sup> 11,36

<sup>56</sup> 11,37

He admits himself, however, that her hope is not without foundation, because under the influence of food and drink, Claudius softens towards her and gives orders that she is to appear the next day to defend herself:

**nam Claudius domum regressus et tempestivis epulis delentus, ubi vino incaluit, iri iubet nuntiarique miserae (hoc enim verbo usum ferunt) dicendam ad causam postera die adesset.**<sup>57</sup>

The use of parenthesis lays stress on the word, **misera**, that Claudius uses of Messalina, and this makes it abundantly clear that Messalina has a very good chance of success, if only she can defend herself before Claudius. Fully aware of this, Narcissus cannot afford to wait and orders her death.

Messalina's death scene is not a noble one, except for the presence of her mother, Domitia Lepida, who embodies everything of the best in the Roman matron, in this scene at any rate<sup>58</sup>, and provides a dignified contrast to her wretched daughter. She urges Messalina to accept the situation with honour.

**transisse vitam neque aliud quam morti decus quaerendum.**<sup>59</sup>

Hallett<sup>60</sup>, citing a study on the involvement of historical Roman mothers in the lives of their adult daughters<sup>61</sup>, says

"The study further observes that mothers customarily shared their daughters' concerns even when they did not condone their daughters' behaviour. It cites, for example, Tacitus' claim that Domitia Lepida overlooked the differences with her adulterous daughter Messalina during the latter's final hours so as to be with her and to urge her that she end her life as honourably as possible by suicide." One of the "differences" referred to above which is not contained in our manuscript is the fact that Messalina was instrumental in

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<sup>57</sup> 11,37

<sup>58</sup> Cf. 12,64 where Tacitus describes both Domitia Lepida and Agrippina the younger as **impudica, infamis, violenta, haud minus vitiis aemulabantur quam si qua ex fortuna prospera acceperant.**

<sup>59</sup> 11,37

<sup>60</sup> Hallett 1984:259 (List A)

<sup>61</sup> Phillips, J.E., 1978 "Roman Mothers and the Lives of their Adult Daughters," *Helios* n.s. 6.1, 69-80. See also Dixon 1988:218 (List B)

securing the execution of her mother's third husband, Gaius Appius Junius Silanus. In our extant text, Narcissus is credited with contriving the death of Silanus<sup>62</sup>, but presumably the details were contained in the missing portions of the *Annals*. For fuller information, we have to turn to Dio Cassius<sup>63</sup>, and he implicates Messalina in the murder.

Tacitus has saved his most damning condemnation of Messalina for this moment and his bald statement has dramatic effect.

**sed animo per libidines corrupto nihil honestum inerat;...**<sup>64</sup>

Messalina has met her downfall through constant pandering to her **libidines** and now she finds that there is no reserve of courage or fortitude in her weak nature. Even when she realises that there is no escape, she cannot die nobly as a Roman **matrona** should:

**Tunc primum fortunam suam introspevit ferrumque accepit, quod frustra iugulo aut pectori per trepidationem admovens ictu tribuni transigitur.**<sup>65</sup>

Fortitude in the face of death can, in Roman eyes, sometimes offset a worthless life, but Messalina remains in death what she was in life, weak, shallow and without courage.

The epithet **dominandi avida** does not fit Messalina quite as neatly as it does some of the other women studied in this thesis. Messalina does not appear to crave power for its own sake, in the way that Agrippina the younger, for example, does. Messalina enjoys wielding the power she has as the emperor's wife in order to fulfil her own desires, but since Claudius was never expected to be emperor, it seems likely that she merely exploited the situation in which she found herself, rather than planned for it. In fact Levick suggests that marriage to Messalina was a feather in Claudius' cap, rather than **vice versa**<sup>66</sup>, since her descent and connections were of superior merit. That does not mean to say that once Claudius became emperor Messalina did not do all she could to exploit the power her

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<sup>62</sup> 11,29 ...**Appianae caedis molitor Narcissus...**

<sup>63</sup> Dio Cassius 60,14,3

<sup>64</sup> 11,37

<sup>65</sup> 11,38

<sup>66</sup> Levick 1990:55 (List B)

position gave her, hence her use of the criminal courts to dispose of those who might threaten the **status quo**, and deprive her of her unexpected good fortune.

Her successor as Claudius' wife, Agrippina the younger, is a very different character, not least in the manner of her death, and the reader will often make mental comparisons as the narrative progresses. There is a point, however, where Tacitus himself makes a direct comparison between Messalina and Agrippina, underlining the essential difference between them.

**versa ex eo civitas et cuncta feminae oboediebant, non per lasciviam, ut Messalina, rebus Romanis inludenti. adductum et quasi virile servitium: palam severitas ac saepius superbia; nihil domi impudicum, nisi dominationi expediret.**<sup>67</sup>

The words **lascivia** and **inludenti** characterise Messalina completely. Her whole life is devoted to her own amusement and the juxtaposition of **inludenti** with **rebus Romanis** underlines the frivolous use to which she puts the power she has as the wife of the emperor.

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<sup>67</sup> 12,7

## CHAPTER 8: AGRIPPINA: PART I.

Agrippina the younger is arguably Tacitus' most important female character. Even though parts of the manuscript dealing with Messalina are lost to us, it does not seem logical to assume that he gave greater weight to her characterisation. There is an essential difference between Messalina and her successor as Claudius' wife, Agrippina the younger. Messalina is interested in power only as a means to an end, and that end is the fulfilment of her desire for novelty, excitement and pleasure. Agrippina, on the other hand, is interested in power for political reasons, to enhance the position of herself and her son, Nero, through whom she intends ultimately to rule, which is the supreme expression of political power. Bauman characterises her ambition in this way: "She proposed coming as close as it was possible for a woman to come to a partnership in power; she would be, in fact though not in law, a **socia imperii**."<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I will trace Agrippina's rise to power, and comment on the ways and means Tacitus uses to depict the character of this formidable woman, using comparisons with other characters and other historians to illustrate Tacitus' techniques.

Agrippina the younger was the daughter of Germanicus, nephew of Tiberius, and Agrippina the elder, daughter of Agrippa and Julia. She was born in AD 15, and married Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus in AD 28. The first mention of her in the Annals reflects the importance of her marriage in the complicated web of relationships that made up the imperial family. As so often at the first appearance of a character<sup>2</sup>, her lineage is given, so that the reader can place her in relation to characters already known.<sup>3</sup>

**Ceterum Tiberius neptem Agrippinam Germanico ortam cum coram Cn. Domitio tradidisset, in urbe celebrari nuptias iussit. in Domitio super vetustatem generis propinquum Caesaribus sanguinem delegerat; nam is aviam Octaviam et per eam Augustum avunculum praeferebat.**<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bauman 1992:179 (List B)

<sup>2</sup> As, for example, in the case of Poppaea Sabina, wife of Nero; see 13,45

<sup>3</sup> See Hallett 1984:57 (List B) for the importance of being the daughter of a famous father.

<sup>4</sup> 4,75

Domitius may indeed have come from an ancient family, but we learn from other sources that he was not a credit to his ancestors. Dio tells us that he recognised his own deficiencies, and those of Agrippina, in the following way:

καίτοι καὶ τὴν πονηρίαν καὶ τὴν ἀσέλγειαν τὴν τοῦ Νέρωνος καὶ ὁ Δομίτιος ὁ πατὴρ ἱκανῶς, οὐκ ἐκ μαντείας ἀλλ' ἐκ τῶν τρόπων τῶν τε ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τῶν τῆς Ἀγριππίνης, προείδετο, καὶ εἶπεν ὅτι "ἀδύνατόν ἐστιν ἀνδρα τινὰ ἀγαθὸν ἐκ τε ἐμοῦ καὶ ἐκ ταύτης γεννηθῆναι."<sup>5</sup>

Their son, the future emperor Nero, was born in AD 37. Agrippina was condemned under the emperor Gaius (AD 37-41) on charges of adultery and treason and banished<sup>6</sup>. Domitius died in about AD 40 and after her recall from exile by Claudius, Agrippina married Passienus Crispus, a very wealthy man, whom she was believed subsequently to have murdered.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the gap in our manuscript after the death of Tiberius, we do not have Tacitus' account of the reign of Gaius (Caligula), nor of the first six years of Claudius' reign. Consequently there is no mention of Agrippina's early life in the *Annals*, and in fact, in the text we have extant, there is only one allusion to her before she takes centre stage as the prospective and then actual wife of Claudius and mother of Nero. This allusion is an uncharacteristic one, which I noted previously in my chapter on Messalina.<sup>8</sup>

**et matri Agrippinae miseratio augebatur ob saevitiam Messalinae, quae semper infesta et tunc commotior...**<sup>9</sup>

Agrippina as an object of pity is an unfamiliar image, but at this stage she is an unknown quantity and of importance only as a member of the imperial family, more particularly as the only surviving child of the popular Germanicus. We are reliant on other sources for

<sup>5</sup> Dio Cassius 61,2,3

<sup>6</sup> Dio Cassius 59,22,8

<sup>7</sup> Syme 1958:328 (List B) and Bauman 1992:179 (List B)

<sup>8</sup> See chapter 7.

<sup>9</sup> 11,12

most of the details of her life prior to her marriage to Claudius<sup>10</sup>. Because of the gaps in our text, we do not know whether Tacitus prepared the reader for the important role that Agrippina was to play in Books 12, 13 and 14 of the *Annals*. There may well have been some anticipatory remarks or foreshadowings, but for us, Agrippina bursts full-blown into the narrative after the death of Messalina.

Tacitus and Suetonius give conflicting reports concerning Claudius' reaction to his new status as a widower. Tacitus describes him as **Claudio, caelibis vitae intoleranti et coniugum imperiis obnoxio**<sup>11</sup> while Suetonius portrays him as initially determined not to marry again<sup>12</sup>. Tacitus describes the freedmen as the driving force behind the moves for Claudius to remarry, whereas Suetonius attributes the idea to Claudius himself. Whatever the truth of the matter, Tacitus' device, if that is what it is, does contribute to the picture of Claudius as a weak character, manipulated by his wives and freedmen<sup>13</sup>.

The emphasis at this point is on Agrippina's strong credentials for the position of wife to the emperor; as yet nothing is mentioned about her character.

**at Pallas id maxime in Agrippina laudare quod Germanici nepotem secum traheret, dignum prorsus imperatoria fortuna: stirpem nobilem et familiae Iuliae Claudiaequae posteros coniungeret, ne femina expertae fecunditatis, integra iuventa, claritudinem Caesarum aliam in domum ferret.**<sup>14</sup>

I have noted elsewhere<sup>15</sup> the use of **femina** when the desirable attributes of the character in question are being emphasised. Since **femina** is linked etymologically with **fetus**, **fecundus** and other words signifying procreation<sup>16</sup>, it has a double significance here, where Agrippina's fertility is being put forward in support of her candidacy. She does not,

<sup>10</sup> See Dio Cassius 59,22,6-9

<sup>11</sup> 12,1

<sup>12</sup> Suetonius: Claudius, 26

<sup>13</sup> Walker 1968:26 (List B) and Syme 1958:259-260 (List B)

<sup>14</sup> 12,2

<sup>15</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>16</sup> L&S s.v. **femina**. Treggiari has a different etymology, which I have quoted in chapter 4. Since there are as many etymologies as etymologists, I am merely noting the conflict of ideas; further investigation is outside the scope of this study.

however, rely on others to advance her case, but takes an active part in promoting her own cause.

**Praevaluere haec adiuta Agrippinae inlecebris: ad eum per speciem necessitudinis crebro ventitando pellicit patrum ut praelata ceteris et nondum uxor potentia uxoria iam uteretur.**<sup>17</sup>

Agrippina has no qualms about using her feminine wiles, *inlecebrae*, to win Claudius over<sup>18</sup>, and since he has already been described as *coniugum imperiis obnoxio*<sup>19</sup>, Tacitus leaves the reader in no doubt about the extent of the *potentia uxoria* that Agrippina enjoys even before her marriage. I have noted the use of *pellicere* previously in connection with Augustus' deliberate wooing of the populace on his assumption of power<sup>20</sup> and in this instance it is also used of a character who is consciously attempting to manipulate another. Dio also notes Agrippina's use of her charms to increase her influence over Claudius and describes her conduct as being rather more familiar than becomes a niece<sup>21</sup>. Suetonius' account accords with those of Tacitus and Dio<sup>22</sup>.

Agrippina wastes no time in pursuing her own goals. Before her marriage to Claudius has even taken place, she sets about putting her schemes into action.

**nam ubi sui matrimonii certa fuit, struere maiora nuptiasque Domitii, quem ex Cn. Ahenobarbo genuerat, et Octaviae Caesaris filiae moliri;...**<sup>23</sup>

This is not the only occasion upon which Tacitus uses the word *moliri* of Agrippina and her efforts to influence events to suit her plans. It is a dynamic word and is listed in Lewis and Short as rare but classical. It contributes markedly to the sense of Agrippina's active striving towards her goals. The entry for *moliri* in the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*<sup>24</sup> indicates a basic meaning of "to attempt, to pursue something in the mind, to strive after,

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<sup>17</sup> 12,3

<sup>18</sup> See also Suetonius: Claudius, 26,3

<sup>19</sup> 12,1

<sup>20</sup> 1,2. See also chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> Dio Cassius 60,31,6

<sup>22</sup> Suetonius: Claudius, 26

<sup>23</sup> 12,3

<sup>24</sup> TLL Vol 8 1358:I,65

to contrive, especially difficult things, things of great moment." The preponderance of examples cited shows that the word can support a distinctly negative connotation, since the goals striven for or contrived include **insidias**<sup>25</sup>, **exitium principis**<sup>26</sup>, **letum**<sup>27</sup>, **consilia nefaria**<sup>28</sup>, and **facinus**<sup>29</sup>. Since the goal towards which Agrippina is striving in the quotation above is the betrothal of her son to Octavia, and this is accomplished by falsely accusing Lucius Junius Silanus of incest, thereby driving him to suicide, I believe that Tacitus is fully aware of this nuance, and is exploiting it.

Tacitus uses **moliri** again to illustrate Agrippina's open hostility to those whom she regards as her enemies, and the energy she expends in taking her revenge on them.

**...atrox odii Agrippina ac Lolliæ infensa, quod secum de matrimonio principis certavisset, molitur crimina et accusatorem qui obiceret Chaldaeos, magos interrogatumque Apollinis Clarii simulacrum super nuptiis imperatoris.**<sup>30</sup>

In using **moliri** again here, Tacitus is emphasising the fact that Agrippina is an active rather than reactive player in the drama of her life. In Roman terms, this is a very masculine outlook; the fact that she attempts to take charge of her life, very successfully for a considerable period of time, and fulfil her own ambitions and desires displays an aggressiveness considered to be unbecoming in a woman. In this instance too, her goal is the downfall of a woman who has offended her, and the word again carries an unfavourable connotation.

Tacitus signals Agrippina's unfeminine outlook by his use of **atrox** to describe her, since this is a word generally used of men.<sup>31</sup> The use of **atrox** in connection with a woman is

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<sup>25</sup> TLL Vol 8 1358:I,78

<sup>26</sup> TLL Vol 8 1359:I,3

<sup>27</sup> TLL Vol 8 1359:I,25

<sup>28</sup> TLL Vol 8 1359:I,32

<sup>29</sup> TLL Vol 8 1359:I,49

<sup>30</sup> 12,22

<sup>31</sup> Kaplan 1979:411 (List A)

very striking, since it is just as much a departure from the norm as is Agrippina's assertive behaviour<sup>32</sup>.

Agrippina allows nothing to stand in the way of her plans. Having decided to arrange the marriage of Octavia and Nero, she sets about removing the obstacle to this scheme, Lucius Silanus, despite the fact that this cannot be done *sine scelere*<sup>33</sup>. The situation is full of irony, since Vitellius, Agrippina's agent, decides to bring about Silanus' downfall by bringing into disrepute his relationship with his sister, which Tacitus characterises as **non incestum, sed incustoditum amorem**<sup>34</sup>. No sooner is this plan successfully carried out and the engagement between Silanus and Octavia broken by Claudius than Vitellius sets out to arrange the marriage of Claudius and Agrippina, which is without doubt an incestuous relationship under Roman law.

**necdum celebrare sollemnia nuptiarum audebant, nullo exemplo deductae in domum patruī fratris filiae: quin et incestum ac, si sperneretur, ne in malum publicum erumperet metuebatur.**<sup>35</sup>

Tacitus has already referred to the incestuous nature of this relationship in Book 11 in a sentence which is most unusual in its construction.

**haud multo post flagitia uxoris noscere ac punire adactus est ut deinde ardesceret in nuptias incestas.**<sup>36</sup>

It is uncertain whether this is a purpose or a result clause. Benario says that it is probably a result clause, "with a malicious suggestion of the former."<sup>37</sup>

Vitellius' fulsome language to the Senate<sup>38</sup> as he enumerates the qualities which make Agrippina eminently suitable to be the wife of the emperor is also highly ironical; although one cannot dispute her aristocratic birth nor the proof of her fertility, the phrase

<sup>32</sup> See chapter 4 for TLL findings on the use of **atrox** with female characters.

<sup>33</sup> 12,3

<sup>34</sup> 12,4

<sup>35</sup> 12,5

<sup>36</sup> 11,25

<sup>37</sup> Benario 1983:127 (List B)

<sup>38</sup> 12,6

**congruere artes honestas** becomes less and less applicable as the account of her actions progresses.

The first comment that Tacitus makes on her character shows clearly that Agrippina is no Messalina, concerned only with the pursuit of her own pleasure. Agrippina has no time for frivolity.

**versa ex eo civitas et cuncta feminae oboediebant, non per lasciviam, ut Messalina, rebus Romanis inludenti. adductum et quasi virile servitium: palam severitas ac saepius superbia; nihil domi impudicum, nisi dominationi expediret. cupido auri immensa obtentum habebat, quasi subsidium regno pararetur.**<sup>39</sup>

She imposes a harsh form of slavery, as a man would, and this use of **virile** underlines just how far Agrippina diverges from the traditional ideal of the Roman woman which I have discussed in an earlier chapter<sup>40</sup>. **Virilis** is a cognate of **vir**, which carries with it all the subconscious and emotional connotations of the essential qualities of a man, including courage, honour, and the vigour and boldness that are associated with men rather than women. Tacitus does not use this adjective to describe either Messalina or Poppaea, neither of whom lacks the determination and drive to achieve her goals, and this can only be because Agrippina's goals are those which in Roman society were pursued only by men; that is, the pursuit of political power and the desire to rule. No matter how much the position of women had changed since the days of the Twelve Tables, no matter how frequent and easy divorce had become, and no matter how much freedom women in the first century AD had in the owning and disposal of property, the one avenue that remained firmly and officially closed to them was that of government. Claudius' weakness of character is Agrippina's ally, since it allows her to wield power in his stead; her mistake is to believe that Nero will be as compliant to her will.

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<sup>39</sup> 12,7

<sup>40</sup> See chapter 3.

In the seven chapters of Book 12 prior to the above quotation, there have been three words associated with power, all of them applied to Agrippina. Claudius granted her **potentia uxoria**<sup>41</sup> before her marriage; as Vitellius secures his position as Agrippina's agent he is described as being **ingruentium dominationum provisor**<sup>42</sup>; and even Agrippina's greed for money is explained as **quasi subsidium regno pararetur**<sup>43</sup>. Power is the theme that runs through Tacitus' account of Agrippina's life; she makes full use of it during Claudius' reign to carry out her own schemes. Benario comments on the use of **regnum** in the Annals as follows:

"Of the numerous instances of the use of **regnum** in the Annals, sixty two in all, only eight have direct reference to Rome; one more may be so interpreted. Its general purpose is to describe the form of government of other peoples. Tacitus specifically states that Augustus did not establish a kingdom or a dictatorship, but a principate (1,9,5); yet this contrast, clear at the time, was effectually blurred as decades passed. In general, however, the word is limited in use to those to whom unmitigated evil can be ascribed: to Sejanus, Agrippina, Nero, and less properly and directly Claudius."<sup>44</sup> He notes the use of **dominatio** in the preceding sentence and goes on to say:

"The two words combine to emphasise her illegal aims, terrible in themselves, but made more so by the fact that she is a woman. Her ambition submitted all things to itself..."<sup>45</sup>

Aware of the public reaction to her marriage to Claudius, which in Roman eyes is undoubtedly incestuous<sup>46</sup>, despite the special decree of the Senate passed to legitimise it,

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<sup>41</sup> 12,3

<sup>42</sup> 12,4

<sup>43</sup> 12,7

<sup>44</sup> Benario 1975:139 (List B). Locusta, the poisoner employed by Agrippina to supply the poison in the murder of Claudius, is described as **diu inter instrumenta regni habita** (12,66); she too would fit Benario's description of "those to whom unmitigated evil can be ascribed."

<sup>45</sup> Benario 1975:139 (list B)

<sup>46</sup> It is interesting to note the terminology used in 13,2, when Tacitus says, speaking of Pallas, **quo auctore Claudius nuptiis incestis et adoptione exitiosa semet perverterat**. There is no attempt here to pretend that the marriage was anything but incestuous. See also Hallett 1984:162 (List B) where she cites the jurist Gaius as saying, at least a century later, that although Claudius' decree was still in force, **sororis vero filiam uxorem ducere non licet** - "it is (still) illegal for a man to marry his sister's daughter."

and conscious of the ridicule provoked by Claudius' resuscitation of ancient ceremonies to expiate the alleged incest of Silanus and his sister, Agrippina sets about improving her public image, and also distancing herself from Claudius' actions.

**at Agrippina ne malis tantum facinoribus notesceret veniam exilii pro Annaeo Seneca, simul praeturam impetrat, laetum in publicum rata ob claritudinem studiorum eius...<sup>47</sup>**

This is an example of Agrippina's acute political sense. By recalling Seneca she gains his gratitude for herself, as well as the approval of the people on account of his literary eminence, while maintaining his hostility towards Claudius. The use of **facinus** here is interesting. The word can have the neutral meaning of a deed or an action, but by using the qualifying adjective **malum**, Tacitus is ensuring that the reader understands that he is employing it in its secondary meaning of a bad deed or crime, for which the synonyms of **scelus** and **flagitium** are given in Lewis and Short.

As soon as her marriage to Claudius has taken place, Agrippina sets about putting her plans into action. A consul designate is bribed to put forward a proposal to Claudius that his daughter Octavia should be betrothed to the future Nero. Tacitus does not make Agrippina's part in the exercise explicit at first, but rather uses an impersonal verb, **placitum (est)**, and a third person plural verb, **inducunt**, to blur the issue of the identity of the instigator of the plan.

**Placitum dehinc non ultra cunctari, sed designatum consulem Mammium Pollionem ingentibus promissis inducunt sententiam expromere, qua oraretur Claudius despondere Octaviam Domitio....; despondeturque Octavia, ac super priorem necessitudinem sponsus et gener Domitius aequari Britannico, studiis matris, arte eorum quis ob accusatam Messalinam ultio ex filio timebatur.<sup>48</sup>**

**Studiis matris** discloses that in fact the driving force behind the enterprise is Agrippina, though she seems to have found ready allies. Tacitus does not comment on the sorry

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<sup>47</sup> 12,8

<sup>48</sup> 12,9

spectacle of a consul designate taking bribes, nor on Agrippina's subversion of a member of a once-proud assembly, but he does not suppress the information either.

Agrippina uses the same **modus operandi** as, with growing confidence in her power, she turns her attention to her enemies. Lollia Paulina incurred Agrippina's displeasure **quod secum de matrimonio principis certavisset**<sup>49</sup>, so once again Agrippina finds someone to act as her proxy in accusing Lollia of association with Chaldean astrologers<sup>50</sup>, and consulting Apollo's statue concerning Claudius' marriage; such divination was in fact a criminal offence<sup>51</sup>. Claudius terms Lollia's activities **perniciosa in rem publicam consilia et materiem sceleri detrahendam**<sup>52</sup> and sentences her to a fine and banishment from Italy. The following case, that of Calpurnia, deserves to be quoted in full, as it is an illuminating vignette of life at the imperial court.

**et Calpurnia inlustris femina pervertitur, quia formam eius laudaverat princeps, nulla libidine, sed fortuito sermone, unde ira Agrippinae citra ultima stetit.**<sup>53</sup>

I have noted previously<sup>54</sup> Tacitus' practice of pairing of **femina** rather than **mulier** with a laudatory adjective, and this example serves also to illustrate the fact that distinction or rank are no protection against incurring, even unwittingly, **ira Agrippinae**. Tacitus has previously conveyed the impression that Lollia's punishment is confined to the confiscation of her property and exile from Italy, but from the next sentence,

**in Lolliam mittitur tribunus, a quo ad mortem adigeretur.**<sup>55</sup>,

it is obvious that in her case Agrippina's anger does not remain **citra ultima**, but in fact goes beyond the sentence imposed by Claudius.

Agrippina is now confident of her power, and her appearances in the narrative are a catalogue of her successes in enhancing the status of her son Nero, and numerous

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<sup>49</sup> 12,22

<sup>50</sup> See also above on the use of **moliri** in this context.

<sup>51</sup> Benario 1983:161 (List B)

<sup>52</sup> 12,22

<sup>53</sup> 12,22

<sup>54</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>55</sup> 12,22

instances of disaster and ruin for her enemies. On one of the few occasions when Agrippina's chastity is in question, Pallas the freedman is described by Tacitus as **conciliator nuptiarum et mox stupro eius inligatus**<sup>56</sup>. Since Tacitus never hesitates to report the misdemeanours of his characters, it can only be assumed that Agrippina, unlike Messalina or Poppaea, was not in the habit of taking lovers<sup>57</sup>. Pallas is instrumental in persuading Claudius to promote Agrippina's son above his own, and to adopt him into the Claudian family. At the same time, the title of Augusta is bestowed upon Agrippina<sup>58</sup>, the first woman to be so honoured during the lifetime of her husband, and her portrait appears on the gold and silver coinage which now show the name and portrait of Claudius and the name and portrait of Agrippina. According to Grant: "No ruler's wife, in her lifetime, had ever been accorded such honours before."<sup>59</sup> The writing is on the wall for Britannicus, Claudius' son.

**quibus patris nemo adeo expertus misericordiae fuit quem non Britannici fortuna maerore adficeret. desolatus paulatim etiam servilibus ministeriis perintempestiva novercae officia in ludibrium vertebat, intellegens falsi. neque enim segnem ei fuisse indolem ferunt, sive verum, seu periculis commendatus retinuit famam sine experimento.**<sup>60</sup>

The use of **noverca** here immediately brings to mind the instances where Tacitus has used it previously of Livia<sup>61</sup>, always on occasions when he is accusing her of evil intentions, or even evil deeds, towards her step-children<sup>62</sup>. The context is the same here. Agrippina is engaged in securing Nero's rise to power, and this can only take place at the expense of Britannicus. Since I have already established that stepmothers are generally regarded as

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<sup>56</sup> 12,25

<sup>57</sup> Suetonius accuses Nero of an incestuous passion for his mother (Nero:28,2) but does not say that it is returned. Tacitus reports the existence of conflicting opinions on this subject (14,2). Suetonius reports that Agrippina made advances to Galba (Galba 5,1) after the death of her husband Domitius, but this, of course, was before her elevation to empress.

<sup>58</sup> 12,26

<sup>59</sup> Grant 1970:26 (List B)

<sup>60</sup> 12,26

<sup>61</sup> See Walker 1968:70 (List B) for the parallels between Livia and Tiberius and Agrippina and Nero.

<sup>62</sup> For example 1,6; 1,9

wicked and cruel<sup>63</sup>, I believe that Tacitus is using the word as he has done before in the case of Livia<sup>64</sup>: furnishing no qualifying adjective because it carries negative connotations as it stands. Bauman comments on the success of Agrippina's moves to replace Britannicus in the succession as follows: "Within two or three years of her marriage Agrippina had virtually ousted Britannicus from the succession. She had forced an emperor whom she dominated completely to bypass his own son in favour of an outsider. Little remained for her to do on the succession front except to be on the alert for any sign of opposition."<sup>65</sup>

Although at this point Tacitus is attempting to elicit the sympathy of the reader for Britannicus as he suffers the antagonism of Agrippina, his assessment of Britannicus is somewhat cynical. He devotes a far longer phrase to the possibility that favourable views of Britannicus arise from the fact that his potential is never tested, and this is the view that remains in the reader's mind.

Agrippina's catalogue of success continues with the naming of a provincial town in Germany (the modern Cologne) after her<sup>66</sup>, and the very striking incident of the pardoning of Caractacus by Claudius.

**ad ea Caesar veniam ipsique et coniugi et fratribus tribuit. atque illi vinclis absoluti Agrippinam quoque, haud procul alio suggestu conspicuam, isdem quibus principem laudibus gratibusque venerati sunt. novum sane et moribus veterum insolitum, feminam signis Romanis praesidere: ipsa semet parti a maioribus suis imperii sociam ferebat.**<sup>67</sup>

It is obvious from this quotation that Agrippina is playing her role as wife of the emperor to the fullest, as is evident from her prominent position in the ceremony, **haud procul alio suggestu conspicuam**, and that this prompts the newly freed captives to offer her homage

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<sup>63</sup> See chapter 5.

<sup>64</sup> See chapter 5.

<sup>65</sup> Bauman 1992:181 (List B)

<sup>66</sup> 12,27

<sup>67</sup> 12,37

as well. It was not customary for empresses to take part in public ceremonies, so Agrippina is breaking with tradition merely by her presence, but the fact that she sits in front of the Roman standards is an even greater insult to tradition, which Tacitus terms **moribus veterum**. For a senator such as Tacitus, **mores veterum** are an important concept, and Agrippina's, perhaps deliberate, disregard for this perception reveals her arrogance and hunger for power. Tacitus makes this explicit with the phrase **sociam imperii** which follows. Agrippina's behaviour in this episode is an insult to Claudius since he is celebrating a military triumph, while she is asserting her equal right to **imperium** won by her ancestor's deeds<sup>68</sup>. She obviously does not see herself as the helpmeet Vitellius had in mind when canvassing for support for her as Claudius' wife, **prosperis dubiisque sociam**.<sup>69</sup>

The narrative continues with the further isolation and discrediting of Britannicus, with the simultaneous increase in the honours and prestige of Nero. Agrippina complains, **multo questu**, about Britannicus' use of Nero's previous name, Domitius, saying that such usage repudiated the adoption of Nero into Claudius' family, a measure that had the support of both the senate and the Roman people, and that disaster would follow unless Britannicus' perverse and hostile teachers were removed. Tacitus emphasises the content and angry nature of her complaint with a series of alliterative p's:

**sperni quippe adoptionem, quaeque censuerint patres, iusserit populus, intra penatis abrogari, ac nisi pravitas tam infensa doctentium arceatur, eruptura in publicam perniciem**.<sup>70</sup>

Britannicus is now placed under the control of Agrippina's agents, and instead of naming her, Tacitus adds to the hostile atmosphere by referring to her once again as Britannicus' **noverca**, with all the antagonistic implications the word carries<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> Her ancestors are Augustus, great-grandfather, Tiberius, adoptive grandfather, and Germanicus, father.

<sup>69</sup> 12,5

<sup>70</sup> 12,41

<sup>71</sup> See Thompson 1957: Vol 5:300 (List B) and Dixon 1988: 156-157 (List B)

Agrippina's relentless progress towards ultimate power for herself and for Nero continues unchecked, although she retains her acute sense of what is politically possible, and plans her moves with great care. This is exemplified in the comment at the beginning of chapter 42:

**Nondum tamen summa moliri Agrippina audebat, ni praetoriarum cohortium cura exolverentur Lusius Geta et Rufrius Crispinus, quos Messalinae memores et liberis eius devinctos credebat.**<sup>72</sup>

**Moliri** is a word that has been used to describe Agrippina's machinations on previous occasions<sup>73</sup> and its repetition reinforces the image of an active, vigorous manipulator of events. The quotation above illustrates admirably Agrippina's capacity to plan ahead, and to understand the moves necessary to the successful conclusion of her intrigue. **Summa moliri** refers to the murder of Britannicus, which she does not, in fact, carry out, and the fact that Tacitus assigns this meaning to **moliri** shows that it can have adverse implications.

Agrippina's status is confirmed by the granting of a ceremonial carriage, which had previously been allowed by the Senate to Messalina<sup>74</sup>, and Tacitus takes the opportunity to stress her unique position.

**suum quoque fastigium Agrippina extollere altius: carpento Capitolium ingredi, qui honos sacerdotibus et sacris antiquitus concessus venerationem augebat feminae, quam imperatore genitam, sororem eius qui rerum potitus sit et coniugem et matrem fuisse, unicum ad hunc diem exemplum est.**<sup>75</sup>

Whatever Agrippina's personal qualities, respect is due to a woman of such a background, hence the use of **femina** rather than **mulier** in this instance. Agrippina is not, however, satisfied with the honours due to her unique position; she desires greater power than has

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<sup>72</sup> 12,42

<sup>73</sup> 12,3 and 12,22. See above for TLL entry on **moliri**.

<sup>74</sup> On the occasion of the British triumph: **currum eius Messalina uxor carpento secuta est**. Suetonius: Claudius, 17,3

<sup>75</sup> 12,42

ever been accorded a Roman woman<sup>76</sup>. An example of this is to be seen in the account of the ceremonies to mark the draining of the Fucine Lake. Claudius presides, wearing the **paludamentum**, the garment of generals; Agrippina is nearby, clothed in a golden **chlamys**<sup>77</sup>. **Chlamys** is defined as a Greek military cloak<sup>78</sup>, worn especially by distinguished military characters. In Roman eyes, military power was definitely outside the purview of women, and Agrippina is making a statement here which reveals the extent of her ambitions. Tacitus knows that his readers will understand the significance of the incident, so he reports it without comment. It is interesting to note that the incident is recorded by Pliny as well<sup>79</sup>. It transpires that the channel draining the lake has not been sunk deep enough, and the work has to be redone. A second ceremony is held, and this time the channel works too well, and everything in the vicinity is swept away. Agrippina takes advantage of the emperor's alarm to accuse Narcissus, who had championed Aelia Paetina for the position of Claudius' wife, and who was responsible for the project, of greed and profiteering. Narcissus responds to the challenge, accusing Agrippina in his turn:

**nec ille reticet, impotentiam muliebrem nimiasque spes eius arguens.**<sup>80</sup>

**Impotentia** implies a lack of moderation or self-restraint, even fury, and is one of several uncomplimentary nouns<sup>81</sup> that Tacitus couples with the adjective **muliebris**, with the result that the adjective itself takes on a derogatory nuance. Benario<sup>82</sup> renders **impotentia** as imperiousness, which, he says, "Romans of the ruling class resented in a woman." Tacitus would certainly be among them.

Agrippina features next in the episode of Statilius Taurus' gardens. Tacitus introduces the episode with these words:

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Dio Cassius 60,33,3 where he says that Agrippina had all power, since she dominated Claudius and had won over Narcissus and Pallas.

<sup>77</sup> Dio Cassius 60,33,3

<sup>78</sup> L&S s.v. **chlamys**

<sup>79</sup> Pliny, NH 33,63

<sup>80</sup> 12,57

<sup>81</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>82</sup> Benario 1983:208 (List B)

**At Claudius saevissima quaeque promere adigebatur eiusdem Agrippinae artibus, quae Statilium Taurum opibus inlustrem hortis eius inhians pervertit accusante Tarquitio Prisco.**<sup>83</sup>

Tacitus is being unjust to Claudius here, since Agrippina is the instigator of the downfall of Statilius Taurus, using the method she has employed before of finding a willing senator to bring the accusation against her target. I have noted her subversion of senators in this way already, on connection with Nero's betrothal to Octavia, and no doubt it saddened Tacitus to report that she found more than one of them willing to carry out her wishes. **Inhians** is a repetition from Book 11,1 where Messalina plots to obtain Asiaticus' gardens<sup>84</sup>. Since Asiaticus was driven to suicide by Messalina, Statilius Taurus' suicide has the inevitability of Greek tragedy, simply through the repetition of one word. Asiaticus' noble death has been described in vivid, emotive detail in Book 11,3, so that Tacitus is able to exploit the link between the two suicides and confine himself to a stark statement in the later episode: **nec ille diutius falsum accusatorem, indignas sordis perpessus vim vitae suae attulit ante sententiam senatus.**<sup>85</sup>

Book 12 reaches its climax in the last six chapters, all of which feature Agrippina. There is general uneasiness because of **crebris prodigiis**, which Tacitus enumerates, but Agrippina's fear has a very particular focus:

**sed in praecipuo pavore Agrippina, vocem Claudii, quam temulentus iecerat, fatale sibi ut coniugum flagitia ferret, dein puniret, metuens, agere et celerare statuit...**<sup>86</sup>

Messalina's fate cannot have been far from Agrippina's mind, and fear of a similar destiny provokes her into action. Bauman says of Claudius' remarks: "The remark came at a time when he (Claudius) was showing signs of regretting his marriage and his adoption of Nero; it was at this time that Claudius showed great affection for Britannicus and declared his

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<sup>83</sup> 12,59

<sup>84</sup> See chapter 7.

<sup>85</sup> 12,59

<sup>86</sup> 12,64

intention of giving him the **toga virilis**, immature as he was, 'so that the Roman people might at last have a genuine Caesar.'<sup>87</sup>

First of all, however, she brings about the downfall of Domitia Lepida, who was not only Messalina's mother, but also the sister of Agrippina's first husband, Gn. Domitius Ahenobarbus, and therefore Nero's aunt. Tacitus attributes Agrippina's actions against Domitia to **muliebribus causis**, another example of the disparaging tone that **muliebris**<sup>88</sup> has acquired in the course of Tacitus' narrative on women. The appearance of Domitia Lepida provides Tacitus with the opportunity for a comparison between the two women, and although Domitia has already appeared in a good light at the death of Messalina<sup>89</sup>, there is no evidence of it now.

**nec forma aetas opes multum distabant; et utraque impudica, infamis, violenta, haud minus vitiis aemulabantur quam si qua ex fortuna prospera acceperant.**<sup>90</sup>

The significant qualities in this list are not the complimentary ones of beauty, age and wealth, but the pejorative ones in the longer second part of the comparison, where the vices of the two women are under scrutiny. Tacitus notes their rivalry over Nero:

**enimvero certamen acerrimum, amita potius an mater apud Neronem praevaleret: nam Lepida blandimentis ac largitionibus iuvenilem animum devinciebat, truci contra ac minaci Agrippina, quae filio dare imperium, tolerare imperitantem nequibat.**<sup>91</sup>

This rivalry is in fact significant, since Domitia had taken Nero into her house when he was three years old, after his father died and his mother was banished. As a surrogate mother, she had considerable influence over him. To illustrate the extent of this influence, Tacitus uses a word, **devincire**, which he uses elsewhere to denote relationships in which one party dominates the other<sup>92</sup>.

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<sup>87</sup> Bauman 1992:185 (List B). Quotation from Suetonius: Claudius 43

<sup>88</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>89</sup> 11,37

<sup>90</sup> 12,64

<sup>91</sup> 12,64

<sup>92</sup> See chapters 5 and 11.

The charges brought against Domitia, for which she is sentenced to death, rouse Narcissus' opposition to Agrippina anew, and he attacks Agrippina fiercely, using highly emotive language, including the word **noverca** which Tacitus uses frequently for its negative connotations, as we have seen on several occasions above.

**...at novercae insidiis domum omnem convelli, maiore flagitio quam si impudicitiam prioris coniugis reticuisset. quamquam ne impudicitiam quidem nunc abesse Pallante adultero, ne quis ambigat decus pudorem corpus, cuncta regno viliora habere.**<sup>93</sup>

This is potent rhetoric. The repetition of **impudicitiam** accentuates the similarities of Messalina and Agrippina, but Agrippina is more dangerous because she is motivated by a desire for power rather than pleasure. The use of **impudicitia** also foreshadows the character of Poppaea, whose **impudicitia** is the keynote of her personality<sup>94</sup>. The asyndeton of **decus pudorem corpus** underlines Agrippina's total concentration on her quest for power, and reveals how much she is prepared to sacrifice for it. **Regnum**, being a cognate of **regnare**, to have royal power, has compelling associations for a Roman audience<sup>95</sup>, and underlines how the principate has become subverted to mean the rule of one man, or in this case, of one woman<sup>96</sup>, which is completely contrary to Roman **mores**.

Having decided to act, Agrippina wastes no time. Tacitus uses the same word to describe her at this point as he did when she had secured her marriage to Claudius. Then she was **sui matrimonii certa**<sup>97</sup>, now she is **sceleris olim certa**<sup>98</sup>. In both cases, action follows swiftly. In the former case, she sets about arranging the betrothal of Nero to Octavia, in

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<sup>93</sup> 12,65

<sup>94</sup> See chapter 11.

<sup>95</sup> The Roman horror of kingship dates from the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus in 510 BC as a result, according to legend, of the rape of Lucretia by Sextus Tarquinius, related by Livy in **Ab Urbe Condita** I,57 et seqq. Julius Caesar was murdered when it was believed that he was aspiring to **regnum**.

<sup>96</sup> See Benario 1975:139 (List B) for discussion on Tacitus' use of **regnum**. Agrippina qualifies as one of those "to whom unmitigated evil can be ascribed."

<sup>97</sup> 12,3

<sup>98</sup> 12,66

the latter, she begins working out plans for the murder of Claudius. Locusta, who is chosen to supply the poison, is described by Tacitus as being **diu inter instrumenta regni habita**<sup>99</sup>. Since Locusta is also **nuper veneficii damnata**<sup>100</sup>, the link between absolute rule and criminal activity is well established. With the use of the word **mulier** rather than **femina** in the phrase **eius mulieris ingenio**<sup>101</sup>, Tacitus conveys his attitude towards her without any direct authorial comment.

Initially, the plan to poison Claudius seems to misfire, to Agrippina's horror, but ever resourceful, she has a contingency plan to deal with just such an eventuality. Having previously secured the complicity of Claudius' doctor, Xenophon, she calls him in to despatch the emperor. It is interesting to note that there is no mention of this incident in Dio's account of Claudius' murder, while Suetonius does mention that there is a possibility that Claudius was poisoned twice, but he does not say by whom<sup>102</sup>. The chapter ends with one of Tacitus' distinctive **sententiae**. Xenophon effects (it is believed) the murder, **...haud ignarus summa scelera incipi cum periculo, peragi cum praemio**.<sup>103</sup>

The alliteration of three different letters, s,c and p, adds to the effect.

Agrippina's actions following Claudius' death mirror those of Livia on the death of Augustus<sup>104</sup>. Like Livia, Agrippina also cordons off the area and sends forth reassuring rumours about the health of the emperor until she is ready to announce Nero's succession<sup>105</sup>. As astute as ever, she keeps Britannicus and his sisters incommunicado<sup>106</sup>, so as to forestall any action on the part of those who might consider Claudius' natural son the rightful heir<sup>107</sup>. The parallels between Livia and Agrippina, both very powerful women, both wives of emperors, ambitious for their sons, and scheming to place those

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<sup>99</sup> 12,66

<sup>100</sup> 12,66

<sup>101</sup> 12,66. See also chapter 4.

<sup>102</sup> Dio Cassius 60,34,3; Suetonius: Claudius,44

<sup>103</sup> 12,67

<sup>104</sup> 1,5

<sup>105</sup> See Appendix for the behaviour of Tanaquil on the death of Tarquin (Livy, 1,41).

<sup>106</sup> 12,68

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Dio Cassius 61,1,1-2

sons on the throne, are self-evident. Walker comments on this with direct reference to the similarities between the two mother-and-son pairs, Livia and Tiberius, and Agrippina and Nero. She says,

"These resemblances are made so obvious that parallelism of language is not needed to stress the parallelism of situation."<sup>108</sup>

With Nero successfully proclaimed emperor, Agrippina has reached her goal, just as Livia did with Tiberius, and Tacitus makes the connection explicit in the last lines of Book 12:

**caelestesque honores Claudio decernuntur et funeris sollemne perinde ac divo Augusto celebratur, aemulante Agrippina proaviae Liviae magnificentiam.**<sup>109</sup>

Agrippina has reached the pinnacle of power as Nero's reign begins. She continues to exercise it for some time thereafter, but as Nero begins to taste the pleasures of autocratic rule for himself, he begins to chafe against his mother's domination, and Agrippina discovers that

**filio dare imperium, tolerare imperitantem nequibat.**<sup>110</sup>

Syme sums up Agrippina's career thus:

"The younger Agrippina is the central figure in the story of Claudius' last years. Rightly. Her arts secured matrimony with her uncle, and his compliance; she directed policy, corrupt but vigorous; ensconcing her adherents at the points of vantage and control, she prepared the succession of her son and managed the business through crime - and with no civil or military disturbance. Agrippina retains due prominence in the narrative for a time - it was the most urgent task of Nero's ministers to block, circumvent and subvert the authority of the Augusta. Tacitus traces the stages and devices in her demolition with skill and subtlety, as is proper - for power is the essential subject of political history."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Walker 1968:70 (List B)

<sup>109</sup> 12,69

<sup>110</sup> 12,64

<sup>111</sup> Syme 1958:375 (List B)

Having dealt with Agrippina's rise to power, in my next chapter I shall concentrate on Tacitus' treatment of Agrippina in power and then later in decline.

CHAPTER 9: AGRIPPINA: PART II

After the death of Claudius Agrippina enters the period of her greatest power. All her planning and plotting to place Nero on the throne have paid off, and she has achieved her goal. As Rutland says, "Until the accession of Nero, her failures were few and insignificant."<sup>1</sup> She cannot, however, rest on her laurels since she and Nero still have enemies who could prove troublesome. While recognising this, I cannot agree with Bauman's assessment of Agrippina's years as an emperor's mother, certainly with regard to the portrait of Agrippina given by Tacitus: "She was constantly striving to come from behind, to equalize a minus, but history had passed her by."<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge, however, that Bauman is writing a political history, using all the available sources, while I am concentrating on Tacitus' portrayal of Agrippina, in which the author selects and organises his material to serve his own purposes; for Tacitus a strong Agrippina is necessary to motivate her son's opposition to her and his eventual decision to murder her.

This accounts for the very striking beginning to Book 13, where Tacitus uses a phrase which sets the tone for the remainder of Agrippina's tenure of power.

**Prima novo principatu mors....<sup>3</sup>**

This phrase brings with it echoes and reverberations of another new reign, where Tacitus has chosen to highlight the crime that the change in ruler brought, as old scores are paid off, or the new ruler acts to secure his position. Tiberius' accession after Augustus death elicits a similar comment:

**Primum facinus novi principatus fuit Postumi Agrippae caedes.<sup>4</sup>**

The chiasmic word order in the passage at the beginning of Book 13 renders the phrase even more memorable, because it delays, and thus emphasises, the word *mors*. Consequently, the reader is in no doubt about the general atmosphere of the beginning of

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<sup>1</sup> Rutland 1978-79:24 (List A)

<sup>2</sup> Bauman 1992:190 (List B)

<sup>3</sup> 13,1

<sup>4</sup> 1,6

Nero's reign, when Agrippina is wielding her greatest power. That it is Agrippina who is in control is made abundantly clear by the words **ignaro Nerone**<sup>5</sup>; Agrippina alone is responsible for the death of Silanus. When describing the united opposition of Burrus and Seneca to Agrippina, Tacitus portrays her in her insatiable lust for power.

**certamen utriusque unum erat contra ferociam Agrippinae, quae cunctis malae dominationis cupidinibus flagrans...**<sup>6</sup>

**Flagrans** is defined as flaming, burning, blazing<sup>7</sup>, and the word epitomises Agrippina. The chiasmatic word order of the phrase dependent on **flagrans** mirrors that of the phrase which opens Book 13, and this is surely not accidental. At this point, Rutland perceives a change in Agrippina's behaviour, which Tacitus signals with the use of **flagrans**: "Now on fire with **cupido** - an old touchstone of feminine character - she no longer plotted coldly but was caught up in her own ambitious lust for power."<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, the use of the word **ferocia** in connection with Agrippina is significant. According to Traub<sup>9</sup>, **ferocia** is used here to describe "a rebellious and defiant nature aspiring to be more than a citizen." I have noted previously the use of words denoting power<sup>10</sup> in connection with Agrippina, and here we find **dominatio** used again in illustrating her lust for power. The combination of **malae dominationis** leaves no doubt as to the evil ends of Agrippina's desire for domination. At the height of her power, then, Agrippina is a formidable woman and it is significant that Tacitus notes the alliance of Burrus and Seneca against her. Such is the strength of her **ferocia** that it takes their combined forces to keep her in check. She certainly does aspire to be more than a citizen, in fact, to be **imperator** or ruler, and in embracing a male role has abandoned proper femininity. As Dixon notes, "Frequent, high-handed interference and the public display of political influence by a woman, as mother or wife, were frowned on."<sup>11</sup> Coinage minted in

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<sup>5</sup> 13,1

<sup>6</sup> 13,2

<sup>7</sup> L&S s.v. **flagro (flagrans)**

<sup>8</sup> Rutland 1978-79:25 (List A)

<sup>9</sup> Traub 1953:259 (List A)

<sup>10</sup> See chapter 8.

<sup>11</sup> Dixon 1988:188 (List B)

Rome in AD 54 provides an example of the strength of Agrippina's power at the beginning of Nero's reign. The coins show the heads of Agrippina and Nero on the obverse, along with Agrippina's name, while Nero's name and titles appear on the reverse<sup>12</sup>.

There are misgivings in Rome about the Emperor's youth and capacity to rule the huge Empire.

**Igitur in urbe sermonum avida, quem ad modum princeps vix septemdecem annos egressus suscipere eam molem aut propulsare posset, quod subsidium in eo qui a femina regeretur, num proelia quoque et obpugnationes urbium et cetera belli per magistros administrari possent, anquirebant.**<sup>13</sup>

The phrase **qui a femina regeretur** is calculated by Tacitus to reflect the Roman antipathy towards domination by a woman and illustrates his power to elicit a reaction from his readers entirely by his choice of language. He is ostensibly reporting the general talk in Rome at the time<sup>14</sup>, but he is also manifesting a very Roman attitude of mind, which he no doubt shares. Through a careful choice of words in the next chapter Tacitus depicts Nero's gradual assumption of power thus:

**Haec atque talia vulgantibus, Nero...legiones...conlocari iubet...**<sup>15</sup>

The use of **iubere** as the verb shows that Nero is beginning to take control, to exert his authority, and this means that he is bound to come into direct conflict with Agrippina. There have been hints and innuendos along these lines already. In Book 12, there has been competition between Domitia Lepida and Agrippina for influence over Nero<sup>16</sup>, and we have seen that Tacitus sums up Agrippina's predicament in a few words.

**...quae filio dare imperium, tolerare imperitantem nequibat.**<sup>17</sup>

Consequently we soon have the first signs of Agrippina's loss of influence over Nero, and the first constraints on her absolute power:

<sup>12</sup> See Grant 1970:36 (List B). Coins minted a year later still show both heads on the obverse, but the accompanying inscription honours Nero.

<sup>13</sup> 13,6

<sup>14</sup> See Pauw 1980:84 (List A) on unidentified spokesmen.

<sup>15</sup> 13,7

<sup>16</sup> See chapter 8.

<sup>17</sup> 12,64

**Ceterum infracta paulatim potentia matris delapso Nerone in amorem libertae, cui vocabulum Acte fuit...<sup>18</sup>.**

Nero is beginning to sample the delights of power and does not relish his mother's hold over him. He begins to assert his independence by choosing his own partner, and his choice of Acte is bound to meet with his mother's opposition<sup>19</sup>, however much it is encouraged by his other advisers, for their own reasons.

The phrase **ignara matre, dein frustra obnitente...**<sup>20</sup> is the first sign that Agrippina is losing her control over Nero; firstly, because he is doing something without her knowledge, and secondly, because once she does find out about it, she cannot do anything about it successfully. In the brief phrase quoted above, Tacitus sums up the perennial parent/child conflict, as the child begins to throw off parental authority. Indeed, his description of the Acte episode is a classic example of this kind of situation. Agrippina makes the common mistake of opposing her son's choice, thereby hardening his determination to disobey her<sup>21</sup>. This detail makes Agrippina suddenly very human; instead of the powerful political figure, we now find a very ordinary mother, making very ordinary, but understandable mistakes in dealing with her child.

**neque paenitentiam filii aut satietatem opperiri, quantoque foediora exprobrabat, acrius accendere, donec vi amoris subactus exueret obsequium in matrem seque Senecae permetteret...**<sup>22</sup>

Agrippina, like most parents, finds it difficult to do nothing in this situation. Without her opposition, Nero might have tired of Acte more quickly, but the lure of forbidden fruit is always strong. Subsequently Agrippina compounds her mistake by trying to win Nero over by offering him counter-attractions to Acte, but only succeeds in creating suspicion in him and his supporters. Tacitus employs one of his most effective phrases to describe her.

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<sup>18</sup> 13,12

<sup>19</sup> See Dixon 1988:185 (List B) on Agrippina's increasingly erratic behaviour.

<sup>20</sup> 13,12

<sup>21</sup> Dixon 1988:186 (List B) says, "Agrippina went too far in the type of intervention she made in her son's sexual life and public offices, but particularly in the arrogant manner in which she asserted herself and in her failure to allow for change over time."

<sup>22</sup> 13,13

**...mulieris semper atrocis, tum et falsae.**<sup>23</sup>

The use of **atrox** to describe Agrippina demands comment. Firstly, it must be noted that it has already been used of her mother, Agrippina the elder<sup>24</sup>. Kaplan<sup>25</sup> draws attention to Tacitus' use of the words **atrox**, **ferox** and **audax** in connection with women, saying that under normal circumstances these words are used in the context of conflict, physical or verbal<sup>26</sup>. Having noted the pejorative connotations of these words when used in connection with women, as opposed to the neutral tone when used concerning men, he goes on to say

"The difference between these two instances is simple enough; the qualities implied in **atrox**, **ferox** and **audax** are properly masculine,... but they can only be applied to those females who aspire towards a masculine role, when they have already both abandoned proper femininity and instead are representative of a negative masculinity (from the Roman point of view)."<sup>27</sup>

The first phrase of this description is often alluded to in order to epitomise Agrippina<sup>28</sup>, and undoubtedly Agrippina was a formidable character, but the second part, **falsae**, describes the inevitable reaction of a rebellious child, (or in this case, his supporters in the court) to a parent who has changed tactics in order to try to influence the child. Inconsistency inevitably results in suspicion on the part of the child, who regards the parent as being duplicitous. Nero's friends would have had no difficulty in persuading him of his mother's insincerity, since Tacitus' description of the situation is psychologically very sound.

Having reduced the formidable Agrippina to more human terms, Tacitus proceeds to show the reader how she acts when motivated by fear. Nero, exasperated by his mother's **superbia muliebris**<sup>29</sup> in complaining that his gift of a jewelled garment is only a part of

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<sup>23</sup> 13,13

<sup>24</sup> 4,52. See also chapter 6.

<sup>25</sup> Kaplan 1979:411 (List A)

<sup>26</sup> See also chapter 4.

<sup>27</sup> Kaplan 1979:411 (List A)

<sup>28</sup> Kaplan 1979 413 (List A)

<sup>29</sup> 13,14

what he owes her, has successfully removed Agrippina's most powerful supporter, Pallas, from his position of power and with her acute political sense, Agrippina knows that Nero's opposition constitutes a threat to her position, so she rashly makes use of the closest political weapon to hand, her stepson, Britannicus. His claim to the throne is better than Nero's own, since he is Claudius' son, and in her desperation Agrippina uses him, presumably in the hope of gathering about her a party in opposition to Nero, with a very valid claim to supreme power.

**praeceps posthac Agrippina ruere ad terrorem et minas, neque principis auribus abstinere quo minus testaretur adultum iam esse Britannicum, veram dignamque stirpem suscipiendo patris imperio quod insitus et adoptivus per iniurias matris exerceret.**<sup>30</sup>

The use of **praeceps** is significant here. Previously Agrippina has planned her moves rationally and with a cool head, but at this point she becomes rash and makes a miscalculation that has disastrous consequences. She voices her support of Britannicus in Nero's hearing, even enumerating her own crimes that led to Nero's accession, and threatens to attempt to win the Guards over to her camp, using Britannicus as her tool.

**ituram cum illo in castra; audiretur hinc Germanici filia, inde debilis rursus Burrus et exul Seneca, trunca scilicet manu et professoria lingua generis humani regimen expostulantes. simul intendere manus, adgerere probra, consecratum Claudium, infernos Silanorum manis invocare et tot inrita facinora.**<sup>31</sup>

Here Agrippina is using every means at her disposal. The words **Germanici filia** reverberate with the associations of Agrippina's parentage, and her threat to use these associations with the army could not be tossed aside lightly. Yet Tacitus shows that she is not totally in control of herself with the words **intendere manus** and **tot inrita facinora**. This is a description of a desperate woman, not someone who is mistress of the situation. This ploy has fatal consequences for Britannicus, since Nero has him poisoned to remove

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<sup>30</sup> 13,14

<sup>31</sup> 13,14

the threat that he and Agrippina posed as a focus for opposition. At this juncture Agrippina knows real fear for the first time and cannot hide her reaction<sup>32</sup>.

**at Agrippinae is pavor, ea consternatio mentis, quamvis vultu premeretur, emicuit ut perinde ignaram fuisse atque Octaviam sororem Britannici constiterit: quippe sibi supremum auxilium ereptum et parricidii exemplum intellegebat.**<sup>33</sup>

Tacitus shows how understanding dawns on her gradually; first that she no longer has any support against Nero, but secondly, and even worse, that Nero has now murdered a member of his family. Any initial abhorrence of such an act has been overcome, and Agrippina realises that she has lost any protection she had through being Nero's mother. No wonder Tacitus uses **pavor** to describe her emotions; it illustrates vividly how Agrippina has not only lost her supreme power, but how she has become subject to the emotions of more ordinary people when faced with the opposition of a tyrant; worse in her case because he is her own son.

Nevertheless, Agrippina does not give up the fight immediately. She becomes Octavia's ally and tries to rally as much support as possible to fend off Nero, to little effect. She is now a victim of the distinctive nature of the court, since no one dares to consort with her and she is left alone except for a few women:

**statim relictum Agrippinae limen: nemo solari, nemo adire praeter paucas feminas, amore an odio incertas.**<sup>34</sup>

The repetition of **nemo** underlines the total isolation of Agrippina, deserted except for a few women<sup>35</sup>, and in Roman eyes women were generally of little importance. Agrippina herself is only the exception that proves the rule. The antithesis of **amore an odio incertas** adds to the cumulative effect; even those who do visit are not all supporters, some obviously come to gloat over the downfall of the mighty.

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<sup>32</sup> See Martin 1981:165 (List B)

<sup>33</sup> 13,16

<sup>34</sup> 13,19

<sup>35</sup> Cf. the isolation of Messalina when Claudius finally decides to act against her. See chapter 7.

Indeed one of the women, Junia Silana, feels such enmity as a result of Agrippina's previous actions towards her that she attempts to bring about Agrippina's complete ruin. Agrippina, however, meets the charges with a semblance of her old spirit, **ferociae memor**<sup>36</sup>, as Tacitus puts it, using a word he has used in connection with Agrippina before<sup>37</sup>. She manages to impress her listeners with an emotional speech, stressing her concern for Nero above all else, playing heavily on her role as his mother:

**ac si Plautus aut quis alius rem publicam iudicaturus obtinuerit, desunt scilicet mihi accusatores qui non verba impatientia caritatis aliquando incauta, sed ea crimina obiciant quibus nisi a filio absolvi non possim.**<sup>38</sup>

Having given Agrippina a very powerful speech in her own defence<sup>39</sup>, Tacitus does not even report what passed between herself and Nero once she gained the interview she demanded. In stark contrast to the long speech just referred to, the reader is told only that she was successful in her entreaties:

**...sed ultionem in delatores et praemia amicis obtinuit.**<sup>40</sup>

Despite all her vicissitudes, Agrippina has not lost her ability to oppose her enemies effectively and to wrest success from what seems a hopeless situation.

Surprisingly enough, at this point Agrippina disappears from the narrative covering the next three years. Bauman concedes that to some extent she has restored her position: "It seems, then, that the three years' hibernation marked something of a revival in Agrippina's fortunes. She was no longer the domineering figure of the first three months, but the setbacks of 55 had not been followed by any further inroads into her position. On the contrary, it must be assumed that she retained a degree of control over Nero and still cherished hopes of a partnership in power."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> 13,21

<sup>37</sup> 13,2

<sup>38</sup> 13,21

<sup>39</sup> Martin 1981:166 (List B) notes the significance of the fact that it is Agrippina who has the first major speech in **oratio recta** in the Neronian books.

<sup>40</sup> 13,21

<sup>41</sup> Bauman 1992:199 (List B)

Martin attributes Agrippina's absence from Tacitus' account of the next three years to literary objectives, when he says that "It is inconceivable that during the intervening years Agrippina was entirely inactive. Clearly it is a deliberate decision on the part of Tacitus to keep her off the stage until a time when her reappearance can make the maximum impact. Nowhere else in the whole of his domestic narrative does Tacitus more conspicuously arrange his material to reveal only what he regards as significant."<sup>42</sup>

The opening lines of Book 14 illustrate Tacitus' ability to manipulate his medium of annalistic history to foster the point of view he is promoting. Annalists customarily listed the most important events of the year under review after naming the consuls. Tacitus uses this convention to underline the manner in which Nero's reign has become divorced from the real business of government<sup>43</sup>.

**Gaio Vipstano C. Fonteio consulibus diu meditatatum scelus non ultra Nero distulit...**<sup>44</sup>

This **scelus** is the murder of Agrippina, and the sentence goes on to attempt to give reasons for the necessity for Agrippina's death. Prior to Agrippina's reappearance in Book 14, Nero falls in love with Poppaea, who acts as the final catalyst in Agrippina's downfall. Poppaea, aware that Nero will never divorce Octavia and marry her while Agrippina is alive, taunts him until he is won over<sup>45</sup>. At this point Tacitus reports that Agrippina, **ardore retinendae ...potentiae**<sup>46</sup>, tries to win Nero over by tempting him sexually<sup>47</sup>, and

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<sup>42</sup> Martin 1981:166 (List B)

<sup>43</sup> The reader is also reminded of Tacitus' opening words on the reigns of Tiberius (1,6) and Nero (13,1). It begins to seem as though every new beginning, whether of a year or a reign, is marked by crime.

<sup>44</sup> 14,1

<sup>45</sup> Scott 1974:111-112 (List A) comments: "For the picture is of a court dominated by two ambitious and dissolute women, the emperor's mother and the emperor's mistress, who are at each other's throats, with the emperor's wife submissive and liable to be divorced, and the emperor being pushed around by everybody else. It is a brilliant piece of writing and a daring way to begin this book."

<sup>46</sup> 14,2

<sup>47</sup> 14,2

there is some doubt among Tacitus' sources<sup>48</sup> as to who was the perpetrator of this alleged incest, Agrippina or Nero. Tacitus takes this opportunity to blacken Agrippina's reputation further by recounting all her previous sins in this regard so as to render the present allegation more credible.

**seu credibilior novae libidinis meditatio in ea visa est...**<sup>49</sup>

It is at this point that Agrippina's fate is sealed. Nero decides to kill her and, if Tacitus' account is to be believed, his decision is taken without any soul-searching over the deed itself:

**postremo, ubicumque haberetur, praegravem ratus interficere constituit, hactenus consultans, veneno an ferro vel qua alia vi.**<sup>50</sup>

This matter-of-fact, cold-blooded decision is worthy of Agrippina herself and has distinct reminiscences of Agrippina's own decision to murder Claudius.

**tum Agrippina, sceleris olim certa et oblatae occasionis propera nec ministrorum egens, de genere veneni consultavit...**<sup>51</sup>

The similarities of method are unmistakable; the decision to commit murder made, the only thing left is to choose the most appropriate means. Nero and Agrippina make the decision, and consult others only about the way in which it is to be carried out. In this case, however, Agrippina is the victim, not the perpetrator.

In recounting Nero's hypocritical reconciliation with Agrippina in order to entice her to Baiae, Tacitus uses a phrase which sits oddly with Agrippina's strong, male-like character which he has portrayed up to this point. He says that Nero acts in such a way that Agrippina might accept the reconciliation at face value, **facili feminarum credulitate ad**

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<sup>48</sup> According to Tacitus (14,2) Cluvius Rufus attributed the initiative for the alleged incest to Agrippina, but Fabius Rusticus stated that Nero was responsible.

<sup>49</sup> 14,2

<sup>50</sup> 14,3

<sup>51</sup> 12,66

**gaudia**<sup>52</sup>. I think it is merely Nero's hope that Agrippina will accept his overtures; Tacitus does not say explicitly that she does so. I agree with Baldwin who says "The allusion in itself may be a light one, but is absurdly applied in this context. Agrippina was one of the least imaginable victims of naive credulity."<sup>53</sup>

Tacitus recounts the story of Agrippina's murder in much greater detail than he normally uses, so much so that it prompts Syme to comment as follows:

"The murder of Agrippina ....seems to show a wilful neglect of historical proportion."<sup>54</sup>

Is this because Tacitus feels some sympathy for Agrippina in her final hours? Up to this point he has painted her as a monster, with little or nothing in the way of redeeming features, but unlike Messalina, she does redeem herself to a degree by the manner of her death. Messalina showed no nobility in facing death, even disregarding her mother's pleas to do so.

**...transisse vitam neque aliud quam morti decus quaerendum. sed animo per libidines corrupto nihil honestum inerat;...**<sup>55</sup>

Yet again Messalina acts as a foil for Agrippina; they have much in common, but their differences are also highlighted by the comparison.

Nero had accepted a plan put forward by the freedman Anicetus, which called for a specially made ship which would break up while on the water, thereby throwing Agrippina into the sea and drowning her. The plan misfires and Agrippina survives, partly by chance, since she is protected by the strong construction of the couch she was lying on, but more importantly, by her quick thinking and resourcefulness. Having seen her companion attacked and killed after having called out that she was Agrippina, Agrippina herself finds her own way to safety.

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<sup>52</sup> 14,4. Scott 1974:106 (List A) takes this comment at face value, and calls this tendency "the one weakness in Agrippina's defence..." Rutland 1978-79:26 also believes that Agrippina was taken in by Nero's hypocrisy.

<sup>53</sup> Baldwin 1972:90 (List A)

<sup>54</sup> Syme 1958:376 (List B)

<sup>55</sup> 11,37

**...Agrippina silens eoque minus adgnita (unum tamen vulnus umero exceptit) nando, deinde occurso lenuncolorum Lucrinum in lacum vecta villae suae infertur.**<sup>56</sup>

**Silens eoque minus adgnita** describes the Agrippina we have come to recognise, who can always find a way out of a situation, and who does not lose her head under stress. Even though she has just had proof positive that someone has tried to kill her, she still has the presence of mind to work out and follow the course of action most likely to ensure her own survival<sup>57</sup>. She maintains this ability once she has reached dry land, and here Tacitus uses an alliterative phrase to describe her actions: **securitate simulata**<sup>58</sup> reminds us that pretence, deception and duplicity are the coinage of court intrigue, and Agrippina has not yet lost her touch. But she has met her match. Nero at first is horrified by the report that Agrippina has survived the attempt on her life and calls on Burrus and Seneca for help. It is interesting that even at this stage, Agrippina still enjoys the prestige and protection of being Germanicus' daughter<sup>59</sup>. Nevertheless, Nero outdoes her in deception by pretending to catch her messenger red-handed in an attempt on his life:

**...tum quasi deprehenso vincla inici iubet...**<sup>60</sup>

**quasi deprehenso** epitomises the duplicity and intrigue of the court. In the next few lines we have **quasi casu evenisset**<sup>61</sup> which adds to the cumulative effect of things not being as they seem<sup>62</sup>. The uncertainty about Agrippina's fate is heightened by the milling about of the crowd on the sea shore, when no one knows quite what has happened. The scene changes abruptly with **ubi incolumem esse pernotuit**<sup>63</sup> and the appearance of the armed column. Uncertainty gives way to precise military action, and the disorganised thronging of the crowd gives way before the disciplined approach of the military.

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<sup>56</sup> 14,5

<sup>57</sup> See Scott 1974:107 (List A) for Agrippina's ability to assess a situation, decide on a course of action and execute it.

<sup>58</sup> 14,6

<sup>59</sup> 14,7: **praetorianos toti Caesarum domui obstrictos memoresque Germanici nihil adversus progeniem eius atrox ausuros**. See Hallett 1984:56-57 (List B) on the respect accorded to women as the daughters of powerful men.

<sup>60</sup> 14,7

<sup>61</sup> 14,8

<sup>62</sup> See Scott 1974:106 (List B) for the atmosphere of trickery and deception throughout the narrative.

<sup>63</sup> 14,8

Agrippina's isolation is underlined by the description of her room:

**cubiculo modicum lumen inerat et ancillarum una...**<sup>64</sup>

Tacitus' scene-setting is masterly<sup>65</sup>. The contrast of the **modicum lumen** and **una ancillarum** with the pomp and circumstance previously associated with Agrippina at the height of her power underlines her desperate plight, and Tacitus goes on to use an adjective that has not so far been associated with Agrippina. She, who has been previously described as **atrox**, is now **magis ac magis anxia**<sup>66</sup>. There is nobody more experienced in reading the signs than Agrippina, and she knows that all the omens are bad.

**...aliam fore laetae rei faciem; nunc solitudinem ac repentinis strepitus et extremi mali indicia.**<sup>67</sup>

The antithesis of **laetae** and **mali** underline the seriousness of Agrippina's situation.

A comparison with Messalina's last moments is illuminating here. Messalina seems not to understand what is about to happen until the very last moment, and even when she does is unable to take her own life. Agrippina, on the other hand, realises straightaway the significance of the quiet followed by the commotion, but instead of uselessly weeping and moaning like Messalina in similar circumstances<sup>68</sup>, Agrippina addresses her executioners with courage and spirit:

**...ac, si ad visendum venisset, refotam nuntiaret, sin facinus patraturus, nihil se de filio credere; non imperatum parricidium.**<sup>69</sup>

With this Tacitus may be attempting to make Agrippina more human, just like any other mother who could not believe that her own son would order her death. When, however,

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<sup>64</sup> 14,8

<sup>65</sup> For comparably dramatic scene setting compare Livy on Lucretia (1,57-58) when the men arrive to find Lucretia busy with her spinning with her maids, even though it is late at night. There the effect is to focus on Lucretia, the only virtuous woman among the young men's wives, and destined to be the victim of violent attack; here the effect is to underline Agrippina's isolation and helplessness. In both passages the reader's sympathy is engaged for the isolated woman.

<sup>66</sup> 14,8

<sup>67</sup> 14,8

<sup>68</sup> 11,37

<sup>69</sup> 14,8

Nero's emissaries begin to attack her, she cannot maintain this belief any longer, and offers her womb to them to strike, since this is the womb that gave birth to the monster who has ordered his mother's death.

**Ventrem feri**<sup>70</sup> are Agrippina's last words, her final illusion about her power over Nero dispelled. Tacitus reports that Agrippina had anticipated this end for many years, after consulting astrologers about Nero, but had not been deflected from her course by their answer:

**hunc sui finem multos ante annos crediderat Agrippina contempseratque. nam consulenti super Nerone responderunt Chaldei fore ut imperaret matremque occideret: atque illa "occidat" inquit, "dum imperet."**<sup>71</sup>

This is surely not a woman given to **facili feminarum credulitate ad gaudia**.

The reader cannot help comparing the deaths of Messalina and Agrippina, and reflecting on how the deaths accurately mirror the characters of the two women. Agrippina is described by Tacitus as

**non per lasciviam, ut Messalina, rebus Romanis inludenti.**<sup>72</sup>

and this sums up the difference between the two women. Messalina pursued power to satisfy her own desires, but Agrippina pursued power to wield it in an **adductum et quasi virile servitium**<sup>73</sup>.

It is interesting to reflect on the way that Tacitus portrays the lives and deaths of these two women. Messalina is more typically feminine, certainly in her life, since she is motivated by the pursuit of pleasure. Agrippina is a sterner, more formidable character, and is motivated by the pursuit of power, a more masculine characteristic. Benario describes her as "a most astonishingly powerful, male-like figure, domineering and tough."<sup>74</sup> Despite his bias against Agrippina, Tacitus cannot hide his admiration for the manner of her death, which matches up to the Roman canons of nobility, and is in great contrast to that of

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<sup>70</sup> 14,8

<sup>71</sup> 14,9

<sup>72</sup> 12,7

<sup>73</sup> 12,7

<sup>74</sup> Benario 1975:114 (List B)

Messalina<sup>75</sup>. It would seem that in Roman eyes a noble death goes some way to redeeming an infamous life. As we have seen<sup>76</sup>, Messalina does not even do that.

Nero does not fully appreciate the enormity of his deed until after it is done, and then he is paralysed with fear at the consequences. By inverting the truth and spreading the lie that Agrippina was about to attack Nero, hypocrisy takes over again, and the lie is taken to its absolute limit with Nero's triumphal return to Rome, **superbus ac publici servitii victor**<sup>77</sup>. Scott comments in this way: "The real victim was not Agrippina, but the enslaved Roman people."<sup>78</sup> The extent of Tacitus' pessimism in the face of such unmitigated evil is revealed in his comment on the prodigies that occurred after the death of Agrippina:

**prodigia quoque crebra et inrita intercessere:...quae adeo sine cura deum eveniebant et multos post annos Nero imperium et scelera continuaverit.**<sup>79</sup>

With the wisdom of hindsight, Tacitus knows that Agrippina has served to restrain Nero from his worst excesses during her lifetime, but, with her death, even these restraints are gone, and Nero plunges into even greater evil:

**...seque in omnis libidines effudit quas male coercitas qualiscumque matris reverentia tardaverat.**<sup>80</sup>

It is true that Tacitus portrays Agrippina as perhaps the most qualified of all the women I have examined in this study for the epithet **dominandi avida**. This is illustrated by her anticipation of the power she will enjoy on her marriage to Claudius when she begins to scheme to bring about Nero's betrothal to Octavia even before she marries Claudius. The murder of Claudius can be put down to the fact that he threatens her position when he begins to show signs of favouring Britannicus above Nero, a natural move for a father.

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<sup>75</sup> 11,38

<sup>76</sup> See chapter 7.

<sup>77</sup> 14,13

<sup>78</sup> Scott 1974:109 (List A). See also Walker 1968:79 (List B)

<sup>79</sup> 14,12

<sup>80</sup> 14,13

One can also cite her championing of Britannicus' cause against her own son when Nero will not bend to her desires. A desire for power is indeed her most obvious characteristic. Nonetheless, one can only agree with Bauman's final assessment of her: "In spite of her many unpleasant qualities, one cannot help feeling a certain admiration for Julia Agrippina, the last of the really great Julio-Claudian matrons."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Bauman 1992:219 (List B)

## CHAPTER 10: BOUDICCA

One of the least devious female characters to appear in the *Annals* of Tacitus is Boudicca, the queen of the British tribe of the Iceni, who leads her people in a revolt, albeit unsuccessful, against the might of Rome. Ten consecutive chapters of Book 14 of the *Annals* are devoted to the story of Boudicca and her revolt, which means that Tacitus himself regarded it as an important event. It is a self-contained episode, and by concentrating his attention on it, Tacitus does not allow any extraneous material to detract from its impact.

The episode is worthy of study for several reasons. First is the fact that Boudicca is not a Roman woman, unlike the others I have included in this study; consequently she provides a contrast in type and background, thus highlighting Tacitus' attitude to and expectations of the Roman woman. Secondly, her story is part of the wider story of the Roman conquest of Britain, for which reference to the *Agricola* is useful<sup>1</sup>. The background to the conquest of Britain illustrates the Roman perception of a foreign land both before and during the process of Romanisation, and the progress and effects of this process. Thirdly, it becomes obvious as the narrative progresses that Tacitus does not regard the conquest of Britain as an unqualified blessing for the Britons, as, for example, when he describes the rebellious Britons as:

**...qui alii nondum servitio fracti...**<sup>2</sup>

The tension between the obvious sympathy of the Roman historian for the British cause, and the lack of authorial enthusiasm for the Roman mission pervades the narrative, adding yet another dimension to Tacitus' aversion to the principate, which I have discussed in an earlier chapter<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Agricola*, 11-15. Martin 1981:174 (List B) says, "...it should also be remembered that *Agricola*, Tacitus' father-in-law, served as a young man of twenty on the headquarters staff of Suetonius Paullinus at the time of the rebellion." Tacitus, therefore, had access to first hand information about the rebellion.

<sup>2</sup> 14,31

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 2.

The historical background of the other women examined in this thesis is Roman and I have dealt in general terms with the Roman system of government, in other words, the principate, in chapter two, since, for Tacitus, the principate is the single most important factor in the history of Rome during the period he is dealing with. The fact that Boudicca's rebellion is an episode in British history just as much as in Roman history means that it is necessary to examine the background to the Roman conquest of Britain to appreciate fully Tacitus' portrayal of the revolt of the Iceni. Consequently, more space is devoted to the historical background within this chapter than in the others.

In Chapters 11-16 of the *Agricola*, Tacitus gives a brief résumé of the events in Britain prior to the arrival of Agricola, beginning with a short description of the people that the Romans found there, correctly noting their common Celtic ancestry with the Gauls, and the similarities between them in physical characteristics, religious ritual and beliefs, language and attitudes, particularly in times of hardship and danger. Here Tacitus comments on the effects of close contact with the Roman Empire, when he says that the Britons have more spirit than the Gauls, since they have not yet been softened by protracted peace:

**Plus tamen ferociae Britanni praeferunt, ut quos nondum longa pax emollierit.**<sup>4</sup>

Tacitus says that the Britons are as the Gauls used to be before contact with Rome brought decadence with peace, and valour went the way of lost liberty<sup>5</sup>. This idea that uncivilised (by Rome, that is) tribes represented an unsullied, noble, ideal state occurs frequently in Tacitus<sup>6</sup> as he surveys the changes that have been wrought through contact with Rome. It may be that he sees such tribes as having more in common with the stereotyped ideal of the early Roman warrior/farmer who only left his crops to wage war, and who did not look for conquest and expansion, which, when they came, brought with

<sup>4</sup> *Agricola*, 11

<sup>5</sup> *Agricola*, 11: *mox segnitia cum otio intravit, amissa virtute pariter ac libertate.*

<sup>6</sup> Walker 1968:225 ff (List B)

them wealth, luxury and decadence<sup>7</sup>. Walker lists Tacitus' treatment of such foreign barbarians in her examination of what she calls Tacitus' type-characters<sup>8</sup>. This type-character she calls the Noble Savage, and says that Tacitus uses the type as a contrast to the servile society of Rome.

"The Noble Savage is everywhere drawn larger than life, because for the author he is more real than the realistic figures of factual history. In the barbarian's relation to the Roman, the problem of Tyranny is seen once more, and more sharply defined than it is in Rome."<sup>9</sup>

In fact, the idea that the Britons were uncivilised savages is far from the truth, partly because contact with Rome in the form of trade had been in existence for many years. The close links between Britain and Gaul meant that information and trade flowed freely between the related peoples on either side of the Channel. Caesar became uncomfortably aware of the unconquered people of the island of Britain during his conquest of Gaul, since Britain could always provide a refuge for Gauls fleeing Roman power, and a focus for anti-Roman sentiment, perhaps even rebellion. At the same time, contact with Roman culture and ideas resulted from the presence of Roman merchants and the importation of Roman goods. The concept of the noble savage, unsullied by contact with decadent civilisation, does not fit the facts, but it does serve Tacitus' purpose of contrasting the decadence of Rome with the virtues of the Noble Savage.

While reading the narrative concerning the revolt of the Iceni, the reader must always bear in mind that Tacitus is using Boudicca and the Britons for a specific purpose of his own, and this accounts for the fact that he does not dwell on Boudicca as a character, but rather exploits her as a symbol of heroism in the face of tyranny. Her story is a tragic one, guaranteed to engage the reader's sympathy, but as a personality she is depicted in far less detail than most of the imperial ladies we have already met.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf Sallust: **Praefatio** and Livy: **Praefatio**.

<sup>8</sup> Walker 1968:225 ff (List B)

<sup>9</sup> Walker 1968:226 (List B)

Tacitus' purpose in recounting Boudicca's story is to contrast Rome and Britain, and he exploits to the full the differences in lifestyle between the two cultures. There are certain areas in which the two societies, Roman and Celtic, differed markedly, in particular in the spheres of religion and the status of women. Roman religion was to all intents and purposes a state-run institution with rules and regulations that had to be satisfied to ensure the smooth progress of the state<sup>10</sup>, but it certainly did not elicit frenzy or intensity of belief in its followers. The religion of the Britons, on the other hand, had a very strong influence on its adherents, and served as a unifying factor among the various tribes that inhabited Britain. In contrast to the society of Rome, Celtic society was profoundly religious, with deities inhabiting every grove and stream<sup>11</sup>. The Druids, drawn from the tribal aristocracy, carried out the duties of the priest class, including intercession with the gods through animal sacrifice<sup>12</sup>. Unfortunately, being part of an unlettered society, the Druids have left no records for us to study, and all we have left is the impression they left on other peoples, looking at them from the outside, and therefore this evidence is likely to be unreliable<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, their influence is undoubted, as is the strongly religious nature of their society, so that Boudicca's leadership of her tribe can be seen as an extension of the reverence paid to goddesses as much as to gods in Druidic society<sup>14</sup>.

This brings us to the relative position of women in Roman and Celtic society. Elsewhere I have outlined the position of women in Roman society<sup>15</sup>. Celtic society presents a strikingly different picture. In law and religion, and in general attitudes to the sexes, Celtic society regarded women as equal to men<sup>16</sup>. In particular, Celtic religion revered many powerful goddesses and the status of women as a whole was in no way subordinate to that of men. It is possible that the Druids admitted priestesses as well as priests to their

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<sup>10</sup> Carcopino 1941:138 (List B)

<sup>11</sup> Fraser 1988:52 (List B)

<sup>12</sup> Fraser 1988:68 (List B)

<sup>13</sup> Fraser 1988:68-69 (List B)

<sup>14</sup> Fraser 1988:14 (List B)

<sup>15</sup> See chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> Fraser 1988:51 (List B)

ranks<sup>17</sup>. Tacitus himself comments on this cardinal difference between the two societies when he says of the Britons that:

**...neque enim sexum in imperiis discernunt.**<sup>18</sup>

A brief résumé of the background to the revolt of the Iceni is necessary. Claudius' invasion of Britain took place in AD 43, and four years later, while Ostorius Scapula was governor of Britain, the Iceni revolted against their Roman conquerors for the first time<sup>19</sup>. While pushing north and west in the pacification of the island, Scapula had disarmed the allies behind him as a form of protection. This led to indignation and bitterness on the part of the tribes concerned, who were left unprotected, and under the leadership of the Iceni, the tribe to which Boudicca belonged, they rebelled. Despite their great bravery the rebellion was put down by the Romans, but the Iceni managed to maintain their status as a client kingdom after the revolt. This first revolt does, however, hint at the pride and vigour of the Iceni, and it is possible that the memories of it may have intensified the feeling against the conquerors. Boudicca could indeed be seen as the embodiment of the pride and vigour of the Iceni, since Tacitus emphasises these character traits in his portrayal of her.

Tacitus begins the section of his narrative dealing with Britain at Chapter 29 of Book 14, commencing with the dramatic attack by Suetonius Paulinus on the island of Mona, which provided sanctuary for many refugees from the Romans, and was a stronghold of Druidism<sup>20</sup>. Tacitus begins with this attack since, in the section of the annalistic year dealing with military affairs and foreign expansion, Suetonius' deeds in the far north-western reaches of the empire act as a foil for Corbulo's successes in the east. The attack on Mona can be seen as a logical extension of the expansionist conquest of Britain, but the coincidence of Suetonius' absence in the far west of Britain and the revolt of the Iceni

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<sup>17</sup> Fraser 1988:52 (List B)

<sup>18</sup> **Agricola**, 16

<sup>19</sup> Griffin 1984:225 (List B)

<sup>20</sup> Grant 1970:114 (List B)

lends itself to speculation. Were the Iceni merely opportunists seizing a chance that might never come again, or did the Druids on Mona deliberately provoke him to attack them? Here again we come up against the lack of records in an illiterate society, since there is no trace of such a conspiracy in the Roman reports. As Fraser says<sup>21</sup>, in the absence of any evidence, one has to accept that the Iceni had ample cause for rebellion in the injustices meted out to them by the Romans.

Let us turn from such wider considerations to Tacitus' account in the text of the *Annals*. In a couple of short but compellingly vivid paragraphs, Tacitus describes the crossing to the island in flat bottomed boats by the Romans, and the horrifying sight awaiting them on the shore.

**Stabat pro litore diversa acies, densa armis virisque, incursantibus feminis; in modum Furiarum veste ferali, crinibus deiectis faces praeferebant; Druidae circum, preces diras**

**sublatis ad caelum manibus fundentes...**<sup>22</sup>

The contrasts in this passage serve Tacitus' purpose admirably<sup>23</sup>. The **diversa acies** is like nothing the Romans have seen before. In the Roman mind an **acies** consists of soldiers, professionals trained for the job. What they are looking at here contains not only arms and men, but women dressed like Furies, bearing torches, and Druids raising their hands to Heaven in prayer. Their actions too are foreign to the Roman soldier's idea of discipline and correct military behaviour. The passage brings together the two elements of difference I have already noted between the two societies, namely, religion and women. Tacitus' description is almost cinematic in its vividness, with the emphasis on the Britons and their outlandish appearance to begin with, and then changing to the Romans as they overcome

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<sup>21</sup> Fraser 1988:69 (List B)

<sup>22</sup> 14,30

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed analysis of Tacitus' literary methods in this passage, see Miller 1969:107-108 (List A). I have concentrated on the contrasts between the Romans and the Britons, since it is my contention that Tacitus is using the Boudicca episode to point up the differences between the two societies.

their initial terror and defeat the Britons, as befits a professional military machine. Roberts comments on this passage as follows:

"The rebels rely on the extra-military force of emotional enthusiasm, associated with the female and the fanatic, by contrast with the emotionless professionalism of the Roman legionaries. The conflict is presented in terms of emotion versus discipline, female versus, by implication, male."<sup>24</sup>

These two opposing themes run strongly throughout the narrative of the revolt of the Iceni; Boudicca and her followers are diametrically opposed in every way to Suetonius and the Romans, and as such provide Tacitus with a telling contrast to the principate.

On reading Tacitus' account of the revolt of the Iceni, one is struck by the recurrent appearances of groups of British women. The first of these appearances is contained in the quotation above, **incursantibus feminis**, and the ensuing description of their outlandish aspect and actions is part of the means by which Tacitus depicts the contrast between the opposing forces on Mona. Not only do the women look fearsome, but their very presence on a battlefield is anathema to the Romans.

Tacitus then provides the background to the revolt<sup>25</sup>, not sparing the Romans the responsibility for causing it. After the first revolt of the Iceni, Prasutagus emerged as the leader, or client-king of the Iceni, and continued to rule until his death in AD 59 or 60. On his death, he left his wife, Boudicca, and two daughters who had reached the age of puberty, but were unmarried and needed their mother's regency. In an attempt to protect his family, and incidentally, his wealth, for which he was renowned and which led him to be described as **longa opulentia clarus**<sup>26</sup>, Prasutagus made a will in which he left his lands and personal possessions partly to the Emperor, and partly to his wife in trust for his daughters, hoping thereby to ensure the future of his family<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Roberts 1988:120-121 (List A)

<sup>25</sup> 14,31

<sup>26</sup> 14,31

<sup>27</sup> Griffin 1984:225 (List B). See also Warmington 1969:75 (List B).

**Rex Icenorum Prasutagus, longa opulentia clarus, Caesarem heredem duasque filias scripserat, tali obsequio ratus regnumque et domum suam procul iniuria fore.<sup>28</sup>**

The use of **obsequio** reminds the reader that such deviousness is commonplace at the imperial court, where intrigue is the order of the day<sup>29</sup>. The implication is that such a provision in the will would not have been necessary had there been no colonisation of Britain by Rome<sup>30</sup>. The sympathy of the reader is engaged by the picture of the widow expecting honourable treatment from the Romans, whose allies the Iceni had been.

The procurator of the time, Catus Decianus, seizes the land and property of Prasutagus, prompted presumably by greed, and when Boudicca protests, she is flogged and her daughters raped.

**quod contra vertit, adeo ut regnum per centuriones, domus per servos velut capta vastarentur. Iam primum uxor eius Boudicca verberibus adfecta et filiae stupro violatae sunt.<sup>31</sup>**

In the balanced structure of the first sentence, Tacitus conveys the fact that Boudicca and her daughters are assailed on two sides, firstly by the centurions, who were the agents of the **legatus**, or military governor, and then by the servile agents of the procurator. The words **verberibus adfecta** and **stupro violatae** illustrate the physical and very personal nature of the abuse suffered by the three women. Bearing in mind their royal status, this is all the more shocking, and Tacitus' stark language highlights this effect. In addition Catus seizes the lands of the Icenian nobles and sets the scene for a bloody revolt.

Up till this point, there does not appear to be any authorial bias, but in the face of the Roman reaction to Prasutagus' will, Tacitus cannot conceal the fact that he is wholly on the side of the wronged woman and her daughters, who suffer a personal outrage, which is totally unprovoked and unjustifiable, at the hands of the Romans. Here we have, as so

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<sup>28</sup> 14,31

<sup>29</sup> See Scott 1974:107 (List A)

<sup>30</sup> See Bishop 1964:140 (List B) and also Fraser 1988:61 (List B)

<sup>31</sup> 14,31

often in this story, an instance where the so-called civilised Romans act in a manner far less civilised than the apparently inferior barbarians. This is another example of Tacitus' use of contrast between the "Noble Savage" and the decadence of the Romans.

Tacitus builds up the case for the revolt of the Iceni by cataloguing the abuses of the Roman ex-soldiers who had recently started a settlement at Camulodunum, dispossessing the Trinobantes of their homes and lands, encouraged by the troops who hoped to do likewise when their turn came. The temple to the divine Claudius appears as a symbol of alien rule in the phrase **quasi arx aeternae dominationis**<sup>32</sup>, in which it is the domination which is described as eternal, not the citadel. The agreement of the adjective **aeternae** with **dominationis** is striking, as is the word order, since one would normally expect the noun to precede its adjective. This unusual word order takes the reader by surprise and adds greater significance to the phrase, making it more memorable through its very distinctiveness. Likewise the use of the word **arx** itself calls for comment. **Arx** is defined as a stronghold, castle, citadel or fortress<sup>33</sup>, which is a very interesting way to describe a temple of Roman religion in a conquered country. It seems as though Tacitus is emphasising the way the Britons regard the temple as a symbol of the invader<sup>34</sup>. The cumulative effect of these abuses leads to the rebellion of those whom Tacitus describes as **nondum servitio fracti**<sup>35</sup>, a description which leaves no doubt as to his sympathy with the native Britons, since he, though a Roman, sees submission to Rome as **servitium**. This word has negative connotations for Tacitus; he has used it previously to describe Agrippina's assumption of power<sup>36</sup>, and on the accession of Tiberius<sup>37</sup>. On both these occasions Tacitus' antipathy is obvious, as it is in the Boudicca episode.

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<sup>32</sup> 14,31

<sup>33</sup> L&S s.v. **arx**.

<sup>34</sup> See Grant 1970:118

<sup>35</sup> 14,31

<sup>36</sup> 12,7 where Agrippina is described as imposing **adductum et quasi virile servitium**.

<sup>37</sup> 1,7: **At Romae ruere in servitium consules, patres, eques**.

Tacitus does not attempt to minimise or condone the behaviour of his fellow countrymen. His choice of language shows that it is worthy only of condemnation<sup>38</sup>. The use of **impotentia** in the same passage further emphasises the inexcusability of the actions of the Romans. This word has already been used in Tacitus' narrative concerning Livia<sup>39</sup> and Agrippina the younger<sup>40</sup>, always in a pejorative sense; by using the same word to describe actions of the Roman colonisers, Tacitus displays his disapproval.

The pace of the narrative increases, reflecting the increasing chaos of the action. Tacitus introduces reports of supernatural happenings, such as the collapse of the statue of Victory, and the delirious chanting of the women recalls the frenzy of the Druids on Mona a few chapters before:

**et feminae in furorem turbatae adesse exitium canebant...**<sup>41</sup>

Here we find another instance of a group of British women in the narrative, again taking an active part in events. This active involvement of the British women in whatever befalls their society as a whole is in contrast to the all-male Roman protagonists. The alliteration of **feminae in furorem** adds an incantatory element to the catalogue of portents that follows, and intensifies the developing chaos. Certainly Tacitus exploits the litany of portents for emotional effect, thereby building up an atmosphere of doom and destruction.

**...consonuisse ululatibus theatrum visamque speciem in aestuario Tamesae subversae coloniae; iam Oceanus cruento aspectu, dilabente aestu humanorum corporum effigies relictas, ut Britannis ad spem, ita veteranis ad metum trahebantur.**<sup>42</sup>

The opposing factions interpret the portents differently, and with the use of **ut Britannis ... ita veteranis** Tacitus balances the hope of the Britons against the fear of the veterans.

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<sup>38</sup> See Warmington 1969:75-76 (List B)

<sup>39</sup> 1,4

<sup>40</sup> 12,57

<sup>41</sup> 14,32

<sup>42</sup> 14,32

The ineffective preparations for defence made by the inhabitants of Camulodunum are hampered by the fact that there are no walls, which allows Tacitus to criticise the local Roman leaders directly<sup>43</sup>:

**quod ducibus nostris parum provisum erat, dum amoenitati prius quam usui consulitur**<sup>44</sup>,

and by the absence of anything more than a small garrison:

**et inerat modica militum manus**<sup>45</sup>.

The alliteration of this last sentence underlines the insufficient nature of the defence. Sheer stupidity compounds the problem as the defenders have omitted to build a rampart and trenches, and to evacuate the women and old people who will not contribute to the defence of the town<sup>46</sup>. The Romans have completely underestimated the strength of feeling among the indigenous population<sup>47</sup>, and the necessity for proper defence of Roman towns<sup>48</sup>. For Tacitus this is another illustration of the degeneration of the Roman regime.

At first the Britons have it all their own way, sacking the town of Camulodunum, and defeating Petilius Cerealis and the ninth Roman legion on their way south to relieve the town. The Roman side is in complete disarray, except for Suetonius Paulinus, who hears of the revolt when he is in Mona. By means of forced marches he reaches London in record time, and here he shows the coolness and calculation under stress which is necessary for the successful general<sup>49</sup>. Despite pleas and appeals, he decides not to take a stand in London, but abandons it to the ravaging hordes of Britons who, after the sack of London, go on to destroy Verulamium. By this time the Britons are ravaging, looting and plundering far and wide, with no thought for military strategy, concerned only with the spoils of war:

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<sup>43</sup> See Bishop 1964:141 (List B)

<sup>44</sup> 14,31

<sup>45</sup> 14,32

<sup>46</sup> 14,32

<sup>47</sup> Fraser 1988:73 (List B)

<sup>48</sup> Fraser 1988:73 (List B)

<sup>49</sup> 14,33

**...quod uberrimum spoliandi et defendentibus intutum, laeti praeda et laborum segnes petebant.<sup>50</sup>**

The thread of emotionalism and indiscipline in relation to the Britons, which began with the description of the Druids<sup>51</sup> on Mona, returns now in full force. Success for the Britons becomes excess, and the victory of Roman steadfastness and discipline over the unchannelled courage and emotional response of the Britons becomes more and more likely. The Noble Savage has become drunk on his own success, since he lacks the self-discipline of the Roman character and cannot survive the confrontation of the two.

It is interesting, however, to note that nowhere does Tacitus mention Boudicca in relation to these excesses, with the result that she remains a noble leader despite the faults of her followers. Tacitus' use of Boudicca as a symbol of contrast with the Romans is evident in the fact that he does not present her as a rounded character; he exploits her story to make his point, as he does with Octavia<sup>52</sup>, rather than taking pains to depict her as an individual personality. Her courage in rising above the degradation she has suffered is never in question, nor is the fact that she shows exceptional qualities of leadership in uniting the tribes behind her, but she is still a two dimensional character. Tacitus uses her to justify the revolt, and does not mention her again until her presence becomes necessary for the pre-battle speeches. This is in direct contrast to his treatment of most of the Roman women I have dealt with, whose motivations, ambitions and emotions he has no hesitation in describing.

In a catalogue of atrocities, Tacitus paints a picture of an army out of control

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<sup>50</sup> 14,33

<sup>51</sup> 14,30

<sup>52</sup> See chapter 12.

**neque enim capere aut venundare aliudve quod belli commercium, sed caedes patibula ignes cruces, tamquam reddituri supplicium at praerepta interim ultione, festinabant.**<sup>53</sup>

The asyndeton in the list of atrocities adds immediacy and the sense of a headlong rush to destruction, particularly as it follows the description of Suetonius' calculated decision to abandon London to its fate, and to meet the Britons at a spot of his own choosing. The contrast, which has run like a thread through the narrative from the beginning, between the disciplined Roman troops under Suetonius and the seething throng of the Britons, is underlined by the description of the two armies facing each other, on a battlefield selected by the Roman commander.

**igitur legionarius frequens ordinibus, levis circum armatura, conglobatus pro cornibus eques adstitit. at Britannorum copiae passim per catervas et turmas exultabant, quanta non alias multitudo...**<sup>54</sup>

The verbs used to describe the opposing sides epitomise the contrast. For the Romans, Tacitus uses **adstitit**, and for the Britons **exultabant**. Even the different subjects of the verb show that Suetonius is in command of his forces, through the carefully planned disposition of his troops, expressed in the collective singular subjects of **adstitit**, while the Britons mill around with cavalry and infantry intermingled, thereby nullifying their superiority in numbers. The plural subject of **exultabant**, contrasted with **adstitit**, exemplifies this idea. In an excess of confidence, the Britons bring their wives to watch the battle, which leads to a greater disaster for them later<sup>55</sup>. This last appearance of a group of British women, this time the wives of the British warriors, shows how fully integrated they are in the life of the tribe. This points up yet again one of the fundamental differences between the two societies; for the Romans war is considered men's business, but for the Celts it is a matter for the whole tribe, women included<sup>56</sup>. This echoes the

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<sup>53</sup> 14,33

<sup>54</sup> 14,34

<sup>55</sup> 4,34

<sup>56</sup> Fraser 1988:98 (List B)

description of the Druids waiting for Suetonius Paulinus as he attacks Mona<sup>57</sup>. Roberts comments as follows:

"Moreover, they (the Britons) fail to maintain the proper distinction between combatant and non-combatant by stationing their wives, to witness their victory, on the perimeter of the battlefield. This intrusion of the female into the male world of warfare is, of course, further advanced by the historical fact that the leader of the Iceni was a woman, Boudicca.....The effect is to assimilate the native forces with women."<sup>58</sup>

Boudicca's appearance before her troops in a chariot, bearing her two daughters before her, demonstrates that she has a fine sense of the dramatic; her followers cannot help but be inspired to avenge the wrong done to the two young girls before them. The two speeches prior to the final battle which follow, one given by Boudicca and one by Suetonius, are both given in **oratio obliqua**. Boudicca's is unashamedly emotive in style and content. First of all, she alludes to the fact that the Britons are used to being led by women in war, **feminarum ductu**<sup>59</sup>, a reference to the fact, already discussed above, that Celtic society and religion give quite a different status to women from the Roman custom. This allusion is Tacitus' emphasis on a distinctly unRoman custom; if indeed the Britons were used to female commanders in war, presumably Boudicca would not have brought up the point. She does not, however, dwell on her royal status, but rather appeals to her followers' sense of injustice as she reminds them of her

**...libertatem amissam, confectum verberibus corpus, contractatam filiarum pudicitiam.**<sup>60</sup>

Since her daughters are in the chariot in front of her, this reference to **contractam filiarum pudicitiam** has considerable impact. Boudicca is looking for personal revenge

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<sup>57</sup> 14,30

<sup>58</sup> Roberts 1988:122-123 (List A)

<sup>59</sup> 14,35

<sup>60</sup> 14,35. For a parallel use of outraged virtue for political ends, see Livy 1,58,7 when, in the episode of Lucretia, he uses the phrase **amissa pudicitia**. This is surely a verbal echo which would be appreciated by Tacitus' readers. **Pudicitia** and **libertas** are among the old-fashioned virtues and values that have been lost with the establishment of the principate.

for wrongs done to herself and her daughters, and her speech is filled with emotive<sup>61</sup> words such as **libertas**, **pudicitia**, and **impolluta virginitas**. She insults the Romans, reminding her followers that they have already conquered those Romans who dared to fight, and that the others were either hiding in camps, or looking for a way to flee the battlefield. Her final taunt is designed to shame any waverers into action<sup>62</sup>.

**id mulieri destinatum: viverent viri et servirent.**<sup>63</sup>

The linking of **destinatum** and **mulieri** is contrasted with the linking of **viri** and **servirent**. Perhaps it is significant that a Roman author<sup>64</sup>, whose Roman audience would appreciate the shame involved if a female leader showed more courage, **virtus**, than a man, puts the taunt in these terms, since it is by no means certain that it would have the same force in Celtic society. This is again evidence of authorial intrusion, since Tacitus knows full well the effect that such a phrase would have on a Roman audience.

In her speech Boudicca uses an appeal to liberty to inspire her forces; the choice is between liberty and servitude. Roberts links the revolt of Boudicca to the larger political sphere of Rome<sup>65</sup>, and finds significance in the opposition between the female Briton seeking liberty and the male Roman seeking to impose slavery, epitomised by Boudicca's reference to her **libertas amissa**<sup>66</sup>. In the opinion of Roberts, Tacitus is aware that Boudicca's cause is a lost one, given the military superiority of the Romans, but it is nonetheless the nobler cause<sup>67</sup>. The sympathy of the author with the rebel cause undercuts his admiration for the ultimate Roman victory because he does not wholeheartedly believe

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<sup>61</sup> Miller 1969:110 (List A) comments on Boudicca's emotional appeal thus: "Boudicca was after all both barbarian and female."

<sup>62</sup> Fraser 1988:96 (List B)

<sup>63</sup> 14,35

<sup>64</sup> Bishop 1964:144 (List B) comments on Boudicca's speech as follows: "To the Roman historians (Tacitus and Dio Cassius) there is little doubt that the most remarkable aspect of this particular combat was in the character and personality of the British leader whose persistent feminism is the keynote of both versions of her speech."

<sup>65</sup> Roberts 1988:129 (List A)

<sup>66</sup> 14,35

<sup>67</sup> Roberts 1988:127 (List A)

in the rightness of the Roman cause, which will ultimately impose **servitium**<sup>68</sup> upon the losers.

This equivocal attitude is evidenced in Tacitus' treatment of Suetonius, which up until the final stages is very low key. Suetonius behaves in a correct and well-disciplined manner throughout the episode, but does not emerge as a real hero till the end. Tacitus cannot allow Suetonius to let Boudicca's pre-battle speech go unanswered, and in his response Tacitus has Suetonius belittle the enemy, insinuating that the Britons will be easy prey because there are more women than men in their army.

**plus illic feminarum quam iuventutis aspici.**<sup>69</sup>

This recalls the **diversa acies** on Mona, where there were many women in the enemy ranks, who, the reader will remember, initially struck terror into the hearts of the Roman soldiers facing them. Suetonius' reference is a stereotyped Roman response about women, relying on unspoken beliefs about their weakness and emotionalism, calculated to instil confidence in the Roman soldiers. He goes on to remind the Roman soldiers of their well-proven virtues; steadfastness under fire, discipline and good training, and to finish off his exhortation he reminds them of the glory that will be theirs when they defeat a numerically superior enemy.

**parta gloria cuncta ipsis cessura**<sup>70</sup>.

Battle is joined and the disciplined Roman army is victorious, but the reader cannot help sensing equivocation in the attitude of the author<sup>71</sup>. One would expect a Roman author to rejoice in a Roman victory, especially against a numerically superior force of uncivilised barbarians on the far boundaries of the Empire. There is, however, a tension between Tacitus' admiration for Boudicca and the Iceni, and the correct attitude of a Roman towards Roman achievement:

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<sup>68</sup> See the discussion above for Tacitus' use of **servitium** in connection with Livia and Agrippina.

<sup>69</sup> 14,36

<sup>70</sup> 14,36

<sup>71</sup> See Roberts 1988:129 (List A)

**Et miles ne mulierum quidem neci temperabat, confixaque telis etiam iumenta corporum cumulum auxerant. clara et antiquis victoriis par ea die laus parta.**<sup>72</sup>

By its emphasis on uncontrolled savagery, this quotation seems to me to evidence some discrepancy between the idea of a glorious victory and the fact that the Roman soldiers did not even spare the women and baggage animals. We have already seen the army of the Britons out of control; now it is the turn of the Romans. That Tacitus does not omit this detail is further evidence of his ambiguous attitude to the Roman victory.

An aspect of the episode of Boudicca's rebellion which is worth studying is Tacitus' use of **femina** and **mulier**, since both words occur throughout the narrative. The British women defending Mona along with their menfolk are referred to as **feminae**<sup>73</sup>; a few lines later on, when seen from the Roman point of view, as a hostile battle line, Tacitus refers to them as **muliebre et fanaticum agmen**<sup>74</sup>. The combination of adjectives in this clause again illustrates Tacitus' use of **mulier** and its derivatives in situations where he wishes to convey distaste or contempt<sup>75</sup>. This phrase calls to mind a similar phrase in the narrative dealing with Agrippina the elder. When she leaves the camp, clutching her baby son to her breast, Tacitus describes the procession as **muliebre et miserabile agmen**<sup>76</sup>. The repetition of **muliebre...agmen** in different settings is not lost on the reader. The British women who tell of the portents of disaster are **feminae**<sup>77</sup>, underlining the seriousness of their message. There is a neutral use of **femina** in the phrase **motis senibus et feminis**<sup>78</sup>, when Tacitus is speaking of the normal military practice of removing women and old men from the scene of a possible battle.

Boudicca's speech provides an interesting use of both **femina** and **mulier**. When referring to the British practice of allowing women to lead forces into battle, Tacitus uses the phrase

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<sup>72</sup> 14,37

<sup>73</sup> 14,30: **...incursantibus feminis...**

<sup>74</sup> 14,30

<sup>75</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>76</sup> 1,40

<sup>77</sup> 14,32: **et feminae in furorem turbatae adesse exitium canebant...**

<sup>78</sup> 14,32

**feminarum ductu**<sup>79</sup>, but when he wishes to stress the idea of weakness associated with women, he uses **mulier** in the phrase, **id mulieri destinatum**<sup>80</sup>. As I have said above, the stress here is on the shame that will accrue to the men of her tribe if Boudicca shows more courage than they do. The juxtaposition of **mulier** and **vir** accentuates this idea.

It is interesting to note at this point that nowhere does Tacitus impute to Boudicca directly the atrocities committed by the Iceni<sup>81</sup>. Since he is not slow to accuse Agrippina and Messalina of responsibility for their crimes, there must be a reason for his forbearance in this regard. None of the words that have been associated with the two Roman women, for example, **crimen**, **flagitium**, **scelus** or **facinus**, appears in the chapters dealing with the British rebellion. Instead the words used are those associated with warfare and military operations, and even if they include pillage, rapine, and looting, it would seem that Tacitus sees Boudicca as a military leader with a just cause, not as an individual woman driven by her own selfish desires and ambitions, as in the examples of Messalina and Agrippina.

It is very interesting to compare Tacitus' version of the story of Boudicca with that found in Dio Cassius<sup>82</sup>. Dio's version was written nearly a century after Tacitus', and differs in many important respects from that of Tacitus. Dio is known to have consulted other historians, but since he wrote much later than Tacitus and did not have access to Agricola's first hand account, it is hard to judge the accuracy of his sources.

The reason that Dio gives for the revolt is a financial one; he says that the recalling of loans was the main reason for the revolt, and in this he implicates Seneca<sup>83</sup>. Griffin does not believe that Seneca was alone in recalling his loans, and, in fact, is of the opinion that the annexation of Prasutagus' kingdom was decided in Rome<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> 14,35

<sup>80</sup> 14,35

<sup>81</sup> Fraser 1988:88 (List B)

<sup>82</sup> Dio Cassius 62,1-12

<sup>83</sup> Dio Cassius 62,2

<sup>84</sup> Griffin 1984:226 (List B). See also Grant 1970:116 (List B)

Unlike Tacitus, Dio gives a physical description of Boudicca, saying that she was tall and redheaded, with a strident voice<sup>85</sup>. Since the Celt was known, according to classical writers, to be tall and redheaded<sup>86</sup>, we cannot know whether Dio merely decided to make his tale more vivid with a description that was probably true, or whether he had access to a reliable source unavailable to Tacitus. I have noted elsewhere<sup>87</sup> that Tacitus is not very much given to physical description; he is more interested in the character of his subject, and how this is revealed in her actions. Since Tacitus' main interest in Boudicca is in her courageous nature and her qualities of leadership, he does not need to provide a physical description of her.

Dio also gives more emphasis to the religious aspect of the revolt than Tacitus does. His account bears the implication that the Druids might have been involved in a conspiracy to overthrow the Romans<sup>88</sup>, and the reader cannot help noticing that when the rebellion breaks out, Suetonius is absent from the scene while dealing with the Druids on Mona. In Dio's account Boudicca is presented as more of a priestess than in Tacitus<sup>89</sup>; after her hortatory speech to her followers, which is placed at the beginning of the rebellion, she releases a hare from the folds of her garments<sup>90</sup>. This is seen by the Britons as an auspicious omen, since hares were used for the purposes of divination<sup>91</sup>. If nothing else, the importance of the coming together of a popular, influential religion and a political resistance against an enemy of a different religion cannot be overlooked<sup>92</sup>.

Tacitus' attitude to Boudicca is undoubtedly ambiguous, since he gives strong emphasis to elements in the episode which are calculated to have a certain emotional effect and

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<sup>85</sup> Dio Cassius 62,2

<sup>86</sup> Fraser 1988:59 (List B)

<sup>87</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>88</sup> Fraser 1988:69 (List B)

<sup>89</sup> Dio Cassius 62,6

<sup>90</sup> Dio Cassius 62,6

<sup>91</sup> Dio Cassius 62,6

<sup>92</sup> Fraser 1988:69 (List B)

manipulate the reader's pity on behalf of Boudicca; for example, he paints a picture of the outraged woman, playing on the traditional view of the weakness of women and the respect due to them, eliciting the sympathy of the reader for the defenceless widow; next he excites the admiration of the reader for such a woman who rises above what has happened to her and leads her people to seek revenge; then there is the paradox of the woman who seems to show more courage, or **virtus**, than the men; and finally there is his admiration for the Noble Savage, which is not wholly consistent with the sense of violent and barbaric behaviour such as he first condemned on the part of the Romans and later condemns on the part of the Britons.

Nonetheless, Boudicca and the Britons provide him with a clear contrast to the imperial women and Rome; Boudicca's straightforward reaction to the wrong done to her is diametrically opposed to the devious conniving and plotting in which the Roman women, with the exception of Octavia, indulge; the warlike Britons, who rise in revolt against servitude imposed by an occupying power are diametrically opposed to the citizens of Rome who meekly endure servitude imposed by one of their own. Unlike the Roman women I have dealt with, Boudicca is not **dominandi avida**; she is not seeking power at all, but rather retribution for the wrongs the Romans have done to her. These contrasts between Boudicca and the Roman women serve Tacitus' purposes admirably.

CHAPTER 11: POPPAEA SABINA.

I have already dealt with two of Tacitus' three "evil women"<sup>1</sup>, Agrippina the younger and Messalina, earlier in this thesis<sup>2</sup>. The third member of this unholy trinity is Poppaea Sabina, wife of Nero, and Walker feels that she is equally worthy of comment:

"Her characterisation shows great psychological subtlety and dramatic skill; the creation of three convincing and individual evil women is an achievement not often paralleled in literature. Agrippina's **libido dominandi** has already been contrasted with Messalina's wantonness; Poppaea - cruel, unscrupulous, ambitious like both her predecessors - is quite unlike either as a personality."<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to speculate on the deterioration of Roman society which allowed the emergence of such women, women who became powerful through the exercise of their commanding personalities. They do not fit the traditional role of the Roman woman, and one can only come to the conclusion that normal restraints and customs had broken down, so that strong women could make their mark in society. Although each one of these "three evil women" comes to power through her influence over an emperor, not one of them is overawed by her position; in fact, each one of them schemes to attain such a position of power and influence.

Poppaea's appearance in the narrative is marked by a sentence giving an idea of Tacitus' estimation of her effect on the Roman state:

**Non minus insignis eo anno impudicitia magnorum rei publicae malorum initium fuit.**<sup>4</sup>

To quote from Syme<sup>5</sup>: "Poppaea Sabina is ushered in as a seductive and potent influence for evil, enhanced by the distinction (rare in the third hexad) of a full and stylized portraiture." It is

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<sup>1</sup> Walker 1968:24 (List B)

<sup>2</sup> See chapters 8 and 9 (Agrippina the younger) and chapter 7 (Messalina).

<sup>3</sup> Walker 1968:24 (List B)

<sup>4</sup> 13,45

the use of **impudicitia** here that sets the tone of the narrative dealing with Poppaea; the view that Tacitus gives of her is characterised by unchasteness and immodesty<sup>6</sup>. His judgement that Poppaea's **impudicitia** brings great evils to the state is significant in that it shows to what extent the emperor and his private life have become identified with the state. Louis XIV of France put it into words centuries later, in "**L'état, c'est moi**"<sup>7</sup>, but the same situation obtained during the principate.

Since there is a break in the manuscript after Book 6,51, until Book 11, we do not have Messalina's, nor probably Agrippina's, first appearance<sup>8</sup> in the narrative available for comparison, and therefore we do not know whether they too were given an elaborate introduction like the one afforded Poppaea. Nevertheless, it is striking that Poppaea's introduction into the narrative is particularly long and detailed. In fact, it most resembles Sallust's pen portrait of Sempronia<sup>9</sup>. Walker notes this similarity, saying:

"Similarly, in depicting Poppaea Tacitus turns to Sallust for a model of the unscrupulous woman.....the general correspondence with Sallust's Sempronia is unmistakable, and the familiar ideas connected with that famous character will inevitably be associated with Poppaea for the reader."<sup>10</sup>

Tacitus presents Poppaea initially by way of her ancestry, as he did with Agrippina the elder<sup>11</sup>:

**erat in civitate Sabina Poppaea, T. Ollio patre genita, sed nomen avi materni sumpserat, inlustri memoria Poppaei Sabini, consulari et triumphali decore praefulgentis; nam Ollium honoribus nondum functum amicitia Seiani pervertit.**<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Syme 1958:353 (List B)

<sup>6</sup> Baldwin 1972:86 (List A) notes that she does in fact marry the three men in her life, but this does not, of course, mean that she was faithful to them.

<sup>7</sup> Dulaure, **Histoire de Paris**. Attributed remark before the **Parlement de Paris**, 13 April 1655.

<sup>8</sup> Although for Agrippina it is possible to regard 12,7 as a character sketch.

<sup>9</sup> Sallust: **de coniuratione Catilinae**, 25

<sup>10</sup> Walker 1968:76 (List B)

<sup>11</sup> 1,33. **Neptem eius (Augusti) Agrippinam in matrimonio ... habebat...(Germanicus)**

<sup>12</sup> 13,45

This description does not mention her mother, also Poppaea Sabina, whom we have met as she is forced to commit suicide<sup>13</sup> because Messalina believes that she is the lover of Asiaticus, the owner of the gardens that Messalina covets<sup>14</sup>. The text suggests that Poppaea the younger had herself taken her grandfather's name<sup>15</sup>, but Hallett<sup>16</sup> seems to think that her mother had used the disgrace of her husband, T. Ollius, as a pretext for naming her daughter after her own father. Whoever was responsible for her name, Poppaea no doubt enjoyed the esteem accorded to the daughters, and presumably granddaughters, of illustrious men<sup>17</sup>.

The closeness of the moral judgement in the descriptions of the two authors is surely not fortuitous. Of Poppaea, Tacitus says: **huic mulieri cuncta alia fuere praeter honestum animum.**<sup>18</sup>

Of Sempronia, Sallust says:

**sed ei cariora semper omnia quam decus atque pudicitia fuit.**<sup>19</sup>

Note the use of **mulier** by both authors to designate what they both considered morally reprehensible characters. I have noted previously<sup>20</sup> that Tacitus appears to use this word in preference to **femina** when his intention is pejorative. Sallust's use of the same noun in similar circumstances seems to add weight to this view.

It is instructive to note that in the next sentence, when describing the attributes that Poppaea inherited from her mother, Tacitus uses the word **feminae** when referring to women in general. This neutral use of **feminae** contrasts with the earlier use of **mulier** to

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<sup>13</sup> Hallett (1984:325) (List B) says "...the mature society beauty Poppaea Sabina, daughter of the illustrious Gaius Poppaeus Sabinus, evidently killed herself rather than have suspicions of her sexual misconduct come to light..." My reading of the text (11,2) suggests that she had very little choice in the matter, thanks to Messalina and her agents.

<sup>14</sup> 11,1 and 2.

<sup>15</sup> 13,45: **...sed nomen avi materni sumpserat...** Her maternal grandfather was Poppaeus Sabinus, consul AD 9.

<sup>16</sup> Hallett 1984:325 footnote 47 (List B)

<sup>17</sup> See Hallett 1984:56 (List B)

<sup>18</sup> 13,45

<sup>19</sup> Sallust: **de coniuratione Catilinae**, 25,3

<sup>20</sup> See chapter 4.

refer to Poppaea herself. Tacitus is not normally given to physical description<sup>21</sup>, but in this passage he says:

**quippe mater eius, aetatis suae feminas pulchritudine supergressa, gloriam pariter et formam dederat...**<sup>22</sup>

Sallust says of Sempronia that

**haec mulier genere atque forma .... fortunata fuit;...**<sup>23</sup>

Here we have two women favoured abundantly by birth and beauty, but lacking any moral sense.

In Tacitus' remark on Poppaea,

**huic mulieri cuncta alia fuere praeter honestum animum**<sup>24</sup>,

the words **honestum animum**, placed emphatically at the end of the sentence, strike a chord immediately because of what has been said of Messalina previously:

**sed animo per libidines corrupto nihil honestum inerat.**<sup>25</sup>

Both Sallust and Tacitus comment on the natural intelligence of the characters of Sempronia and Poppaea, and their ability to converse well; the warped use that both women make of considerable inborn talent is condemned by implication. Sallust says of Sempronia:

**verum ingenium eius haud absurdum: posse versus facere, iocum movere, sermone uti vel modesto vel molli vel procaci...**<sup>26</sup>

Did Tacitus have this in mind when he wrote of Poppaea:

**sermo comis nec absurdum ingenium: modestiam praeferre et lascivia uti.**<sup>27?</sup>

The verbal echoes are strong enough for it to be a distinct possibility.

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<sup>21</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>22</sup> 13,45

<sup>23</sup> Sallust: **de coniuratione Catilinae**, 25,2

<sup>24</sup> 13,45

<sup>25</sup> 11,37

<sup>26</sup> Sallust: **de coniuratione Catilinae**, 25,5

<sup>27</sup> 13,45

There are verbal echoes too in the two authors' description of their characters' moral qualities, or rather, lack of them. Sallust says of Sempronia:

**...pecuniae an famae minus parceret, haud facile discerneres.**<sup>28</sup>

With distinct verbal parallels, Tacitus says of Poppaea:

**famae numquam pepercit, maritos et adulteros non distinguens.**<sup>29</sup>

The replication of **famae parcere**, and the similarity in meaning between **discernere** and **distinguere**, suggest that Tacitus was familiar with Sallust's portrait of Sempronia. Messalina, too, was careless of her reputation, like Sempronia and Poppaea, but whereas Tacitus tells us that Messalina was driven **per lasciviam**<sup>30</sup>, Poppaea, on the other hand, is depicted as being motivated solely by self interest. Tacitus' assessment of her character is chilling, and the studied, balanced sentence reflects her calculating nature.

**neque adfectui suo aut alieno obnoxia, unde utilitas ostenderetur, illuc libidinem transferebat.**<sup>31</sup>

This quotation illustrates how well Tacitus is able to portray three different evil women, each one differentiated from the other two by certain characteristics; Messalina is motivated by the pursuit of pleasure, and commits murder and other crimes in her quest; Agrippina is driven by pursuit of power for herself, and also commits murder and other crimes to accomplish her goal; Poppaea is shown here to be without normal human emotions, but to bestow her favours wherever the greatest advantage to herself is to be gained<sup>32</sup>. She too is party to murder, in her case of Agrippina and Octavia, in order to achieve her goals.

I have dwelt on this introductory chapter dealing with Poppaea at some length because it is unusual, both in its length and detail of description, which set it apart from Tacitus' normal technique of allowing his characters to reveal themselves through their actions. Poppaea goes on to do this in the narrative, as I shall show, but she has been singled out for an

<sup>28</sup> Sallust: **de coniuratione Catilinae**, 25,3

<sup>29</sup> 13,45

<sup>30</sup> 12,7

<sup>31</sup> 13,45

<sup>32</sup> See Bishop 1964:45-46 (List B)

unusually long and graphic introduction<sup>33</sup>. This may well be because Tacitus sees her importance in the same light as Bauman who says: "Poppaea Sabina was destined to achieve what the professional politicians of two reigns had not been able to do, namely the complete and final destruction of Agrippina. Someone as powerful as that deserves a brief biographical notice."<sup>34</sup>

At the end of the descriptive preamble, we are told that, although married to Rufrius Crispinus, and the mother of his child, Poppaea has become involved in an adulterous relationship with Otho.

**eam....Otho pellexit iuventa ac luxu et quia flagrantissimus in amicitia Neronis habebatur.**<sup>35</sup>

The causal clause in this sentence serves to underline the picture we have been given of a woman with a very finely developed sense of how to exploit every situation to her own advantage. Poppaea is obviously well able to see the advantages of a liaison with a man close to Nero. **Flagrantissimus** is a striking word in this context, but obviously Otho was a larger than life figure since it is used of him again in the Histories: **Othonis flagrantissimae libidines**<sup>36</sup>.

In a direct reference to Poppaea in the Histories, the story given is at odds with the one we find in the Annals:

**Namque Otho pueritiam incuriose, adulescentiam petulanter egerat, gratus Neroni aemulatione luxus. eoque Poppaeam Sabinam, principale scortum, ut apud conscium libidinum deposuerat, donec Octaviam uxorem amoliretur.**<sup>37</sup>

In the Histories, Nero is presented as the driving force behind the liaison, in that he places Poppaea in the care of Otho, but in the picture given in the Annals, the initiative is

<sup>33</sup> Always assuming, of course, that Messalina was not given a similar introduction in the missing portion of the Annals. Certainly in the text we have extant, Poppaea is unique in her introduction to the narrative.

<sup>34</sup> Bauman 1992:199 (List B)

<sup>35</sup> 13,45

<sup>36</sup> **Historiae** 11,31

<sup>37</sup> **Historiae** 1,13

attributed to Otho. In the *Annals*, where Poppaea is a character and not just a name, Tacitus says that Poppaea has married Otho, and that it is he who introduces her to Nero, in the hope of binding himself closer to the emperor through the shared favours of Poppaea. There is a neutral use of **femina** here, when Tacitus is reporting Otho's possible motivation:

**si eadem femina potirentur, id quoque vinculum potentiam ei adiceret.**<sup>38</sup>

This may be because the emphasis here is on the devious nature of Otho's plan, rather than on the character of the woman in question. The use of **vinculum** calls for comment, since it is a cognate of the verb **devincio**, which occurs twice in the form of its past participle in the same chapter, describing first Poppaea as **devinctam Othoni**, and then Nero as **paelice ancilla et adsuetudine Actes devinctum**<sup>39</sup>. Since **devinctus** is listed as very rare<sup>40</sup>, its use twice, along with a cognate, in the same chapter must be significant<sup>41</sup>.

To return to Otho and Poppaea. Certainly Tacitus has already painted the picture of a woman who would not be averse to sharing her favours between two men if there were advantage for herself in the arrangement. While putting forward this suggestion concerning Otho's motives, Tacitus again uses his technique of airing two alternatives, of which the second generally seems to be the one he favours<sup>42</sup>. Since Otho has already been described as an intimate of Nero, Tacitus obviously does not expect the reader to believe that such a person would be **amore incautus**<sup>43</sup>, and consequently the second alternative, which is also far more developed, carries more weight. Tacitus is the only historian to give this version of the story. Suetonius pays very little attention to Poppaea, merely saying that Nero married her, and does not mention the story of Otho at all<sup>44</sup>. Dio says that Nero

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<sup>38</sup> 13,46

<sup>39</sup> 13,46

<sup>40</sup> L&S s.v. **devinctus**.

<sup>41</sup> I have already noted its use of Claudius as **uxori devinctus** (11,28). See chapter 5 for further uses of **devincire**.

<sup>42</sup> see Develin 1983:86 (List A)

<sup>43</sup> 13,46

<sup>44</sup> Suetonius: Nero 35

gave Poppaea to Otho after separating her from her husband, and that the two men shared her favours<sup>45</sup>. This tallies with Tacitus' version in the Histories.

The impression given by Tacitus of Poppaea is further reinforced by the narration of her actions once she gains access to Nero:

**accepto aditu Poppaea primum per blandimenta et artes valescere, imparem cupidini se et forma Neronis captam simulans; mox acri iam principis amore ad superbiam vertens.**<sup>46</sup>

Here we have another instance of the use of the word **forma**, which, on account of its repetition, seems to have particular importance in this episode. On other occasions like this Tacitus does not attach much emphasis to beauty, but **forma** and **pulchritudo** occur several times within chapters 45 and 46 of Book 13. Poppaea's use of her beauty is thoroughly shrewd and astute. She employs her wiles first of all to gain the ascendancy over Nero, and then changes her tactics once she has aroused his passion. **Simulans**, and all its associated forms, is also used of Agrippina the younger<sup>47</sup>, since she shares Poppaea's ability to mask her true feelings in order to gain some desired object. With **ad superbiam vertens** Tacitus uses another word, **superbia**, which has already been used of Agrippina the younger<sup>48</sup>. **Vertens** marks the change of tactics by which Poppaea keeps Nero's interest alive, as she compares him unfavourably with Otho. The adversative **at** marks the comparison between the two men deftly, underlining the contrast she is drawing between Otho, whom she describes as

**illum animo et cultu magnificentum**<sup>49</sup>,

and Nero, whom she declares is

**paelice ancilla et adsuetudine Actes devinctum...**<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Dio 62,11

<sup>46</sup> 13,46

<sup>47</sup> 14,6: **securitate simulata**.

<sup>48</sup> 12,7: **...palam severitas et saepius superbia...**

<sup>49</sup> 13,46

<sup>50</sup> 13,46

Needless to say, Poppaea achieves her ends, and Otho is sent off to become governor of Lusitania, leaving the field free for Nero<sup>51</sup>.

With the beginning of Book 14, Poppaea has to deal with a far more formidable opponent than Acte in the shape of Agrippina, Nero's mother, who is no more in favour of his association with Poppaea than she was of his relationship with Acte. Poppaea mounts a campaign to remove Agrippina and Octavia, the two people standing in the way of her success, and shows herself to be the equal of Agrippina in ruthlessness. She resorts to nagging and mockery, calling Nero **iussis alienis obnoxius**<sup>52</sup>, an epithet designed to play on his susceptibilities. Tacitus has used **obnoxia** of Poppaea herself, but in a completely different way, since he characterised her as **neque adfectui suo aut alieno obnoxia**<sup>53</sup>. The reader also remembers that Claudius has been described as **coniugum imperiis obnoxio**<sup>54</sup>, so the contrast between strong-minded women and men easily led by their passions is cumulatively built up<sup>55</sup>. In stinging Nero's pride by the use of **obnoxius**, Poppaea is showing herself to be well versed in the art of bending men to her will. Because Tacitus uses Poppaea as the pretext for Agrippina's murder, he has to portray her as a strong, convincing character, and this speech is part of that process. Walker comments, "It is significant that Agrippina can be frustrated only by a character as evil as herself..."<sup>56</sup>

This reported speech of Poppaea's, which Tacitus employs as a motivating factor in Nero's decision to murder his mother, has its parallel in Poppaea's other speech in Book 14<sup>57</sup>, in which she goads Nero into murdering Octavia. After the death of Agrippina Nero does

<sup>51</sup> 13,46. Griffin 1984:45-46 (List B) says that "Nero found himself Otho's rival and resolved the conflict in his own favour by appointing the troublesome husband as governor of Lusitania, though he was only twenty-six and had not yet held the office of praetor which was the normal qualification for the post."

<sup>52</sup> 14,1

<sup>53</sup> 13,45

<sup>54</sup> 12,1

<sup>55</sup> Walker 1968:31 (List B). Of Nero, she says, "...the atrocities of his domestic life are urged upon him by Poppaea or by the freedmen..."

<sup>56</sup> Walker 1968:23 (List B)

<sup>57</sup> 14,61

not, however, marry Poppaea immediately; in fact, it is three years before the marriage takes place. Nero's marriage to Octavia was politically important<sup>58</sup>, and Nero feared the repercussions of a divorce, which would generate opposition from the supporters of Octavia, since the link to Claudius through Octavia was one of the factors which enhanced Nero's claim to the throne. Tacitus completely ignores the delay between the murder of Agrippina and Nero's divorce from Octavia, although he has depicted Agrippina as the main obstacle standing in the way of the marriage, nor does he comment at all on Poppaea's reaction to the delay. Martin comments on the problem as follows: "If Poppaea had really been as insistent as Tacitus makes her out to be at the beginning of Book 14, it is improbable that she would have let three years elapse before gaining her end. Whatever was Poppaea's role in 62, the part given to her at the beginning of Book 14 should be discounted."<sup>59</sup> Griffin says that Nero could not afford to divorce Octavia until he had removed "the two men he feared most as possible claimants to his throne, Cornelius Sulla and Rubellius Plautus..."<sup>60</sup> Only once this is achieved, three years after Agrippina's death, is Nero free to marry Poppaea.

Returning to the narrative, Tacitus rounds off the chapter containing Poppaea's speech with the information that not only does Poppaea convince Nero of the necessity of removing Agrippina, but that no one else opposes her either. Note the telling contrast of **cunctis** and **nemo**:

**cupientibus cunctis infringi potentiam matris et credente nullo usque ad caedem eius duratura filii odia.**<sup>61</sup>

Is there a note of irony in the use of **nemo** here? Nero has already murdered Britannicus, a murder which Agrippina herself saw as **parricidii exemplum**<sup>62</sup>, so it is hard to believe that no one considered the possibility of another murder.

<sup>58</sup> See Griffin 1984:98-99 (List B) and Martin 1981:178 (List B)

<sup>59</sup> Martin 1981:178 (List B)

<sup>60</sup> Griffin 1984:99 (List B)

<sup>61</sup> 14,1

<sup>62</sup> 13,16

The narrative continues with the murder of Agrippina, which is described in great detail, and thereafter Tacitus ignores Poppaea and turns to other topics. He gives no explanation for Nero's failure to marry Poppaea after the death of Agrippina, nor does Poppaea appear in the narrative again for some considerable time. When she does, Nero is finally coming to grips with the problem of divorcing Octavia, who is so blameless and popular that he has difficulty in finding grounds for divorce. Tacitus describes her as:

**nomine patris et studiis populi gravem**<sup>63</sup>,

and this dynastic element as well as Octavia's popularity has to be taken into account. Once Nero is ready to take action, however, these concerns do not protect Octavia for very long, and Nero divorces her, citing her barrenness<sup>64</sup>. Twelve days after the divorce, Nero marries Poppaea, who is already pregnant.

Poppaea dominates Nero as his wife as she has long done as his mistress:

**ea diu paelex et adulteri Neronis, mox mariti potens**<sup>65</sup>,

but she oversteps the mark by trying to have Octavia falsely accused of adultery<sup>66</sup>. In an unusual show of courage, most of Octavia's servants refuse to make false confessions, even under torture, which gives some idea of her rectitude and capacity to inspire loyalty. Tacitus says:

**plures perstitere sanctitatem dominae tueri.**<sup>67</sup>

Consequently, when she is banished to Campania under military surveillance, probably on Poppaea's urging<sup>68</sup>, there is a popular protest, and Nero

**tamquam ... paenitentia flagitii coniugem revocarit Octaviam.**<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> 14,59

<sup>64</sup> The use of **sterilis** (14,60) to describe Octavia contrasts with all the other instances I have already noted in which the **fecunditas** of the woman in question was under discussion, and highlights yet another way in which she differs from the other women.

<sup>65</sup> 14,60

<sup>66</sup> See Bauman 1992:205 (List B) for the additional advantageous consequences for Poppaea if adultery could be proved, although it was not necessary for the divorce.

<sup>67</sup> 14,60

<sup>68</sup> Bauman 1992:206 (List B)

<sup>69</sup> 14,60

The **tamquam** in this sentence is significant. As we have seen throughout Tacitus' narrative, nothing in the life of the court is as it seems<sup>70</sup>, and words such as **tamquam** merely serve to underline this. There is a brief period of rejoicing at Octavia's apparent reinstatement:

**iamque et Palatium multitudine et clamoribus complebant, cum emissi militum globi verberibus et intento ferro turbatos disiecere**<sup>71</sup>,

and then, without warning, everything reverts to the previous situation with Poppaea in control. Tacitus does not give any reasons for this abrupt **volte face** and the reader does not know whether Poppaea or Nero is responsible for it. Tacitus' choice of language at this point recalls his other strong female characters, all of them variations on the theme of forceful women. Of Poppaea he says:

**quae semper odio, tum et metu atrox**<sup>72</sup>.

Both Agrippinas have been characterised as **atrox**<sup>73</sup> and now Poppaea joins them. I have said previously<sup>74</sup> that I feel that the word **atrox** applies better to Agrippina the younger than to her mother, and on the same grounds it applies well to Poppaea also. **Atrox** is defined as, among other things, cruel, fierce, harsh, severe and unyielding<sup>75</sup>. Poppaea exhibits the same unyielding characteristic that Agrippina the younger does, whereas Agrippina the elder frequently seems to be lost and directionless, and certainly does not exploit her political potential to the full.

In the reported speech that follows, Poppaea eloquently pleads her case, playing on Nero's fears of insurrection, claiming that

**arma illa adversus principem sumpta**<sup>76</sup>,

<sup>70</sup> See Walker 1968:78 (List B). She says "Men know that the tyrant may destroy them and so fear him; he knows their hatred and so fears them; fear makes him cruel as it makes them grasping, and egotism reacts to make them all more fearful; all lie constantly because it is the only way to gain, often the only way to survive, and because they fear truth most of all. Life has become a series of grotesque pretences..."

<sup>71</sup> 14,61

<sup>72</sup> 14,61

<sup>73</sup> See chapter 4 for the use of **atrox** with women.

<sup>74</sup> See chapter 6.

<sup>75</sup> L&S s.v. **atrox**.

<sup>76</sup> 14,61

and revealing her political acumen in realising that Octavia will always be a focus for disaffection in much the same way as Agrippina the elder has been for Tiberius. At this point Tacitus reveals that Poppaea is pregnant:

**an quia veram progeniem penatibus Caesarum datura sit?**<sup>77</sup>

The **veram progeniem** is one of the strongest cards she has to play but she also cleverly goads him with the charge that he is not his own master:

**libens quam coactus acciret dominam**<sup>78</sup>,

as she had done when his mother was alive, and, as before, Nero rises to the taunt.

Poppaea's manipulation of Nero is expert, and she gains her desired end. Nero takes firm action against Octavia, bribing Anicetus, the murderer of Agrippina the younger, to admit to adultery with Octavia. Nero, **incusatae paulo ante sterilitatis oblitus**<sup>79</sup>, exiles her to Pandateria, and this comment on Nero's inconsistency of accusation against Octavia illustrates his total concentration on achieving his aims, goaded by Poppaea's taunts. The tragic end to Octavia's life underlines the contrast between her and Poppaea, particularly in the final indignity meted out to her:

**additurque atrocior saevitia quod caput amputatum latumque in urbem Poppaea vidit.**<sup>80</sup>

Poppaea reaches the pinnacle of her power when she gives birth to Nero's daughter<sup>81</sup>, and in his joy Nero gives her and her daughter the title Augusta<sup>82</sup>. Poppaea's portrait now appears on the coinage of Alexandria, and her figure on Roman gold and silver coins, standing next to the Emperor, with the inscription **Augustus Augusta**<sup>83</sup>. Extravagant thanksgivings are held, but the joy is shortlived.

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<sup>77</sup> 14,61

<sup>78</sup> 14,61

<sup>79</sup> 14,63

<sup>80</sup> 14,64

<sup>81</sup> See Rawson 1986:217-218 (List B)

<sup>82</sup> 15,23. Cf. 12,26. Agrippina the younger was honoured with the title of Augusta at the time of Nero's adoption by Claudius, the first wife of an emperor to bear it in her husband's lifetime. Livia did not receive the title until after Augustus' death. (1,13)

<sup>83</sup> Grant: 1970:145 (List B)

**quae fluxa fuere, quartum intra mensem defuncta infante.....atque ipse ut laetitiae, ita maeroris immodicus egit.**<sup>84</sup>

The **ut....ita** balance of the sentence shows how immoderate Nero is in all his emotions, and consequently how unpredictable he is. Nero is not to know the joy of parenthood, for he is responsible for Poppaea's death, which occurs two years later while she is pregnant again. The violence of his emotions is demonstrated again in the phrase used by Tacitus when telling of Poppaea's death. Nero kicks her, **fortuita mariti iracundia**<sup>85</sup>, and this leads to her death.

Nevertheless, despite his usual condemnation of Nero, Tacitus does put in a good word for him when he relates that other writers reported that Poppaea had been poisoned, a report that he explicitly rejects, for once<sup>86</sup>.

**neque enim venenum crediderim, quamvis quidam scriptores tradant, odio magis quam ex fide: quippe liberorum cupiens et amori uxoris obnoxius erat.**<sup>87</sup>

Here we have another occurrence of **obnoxius**, which has been used previously of Nero by Poppaea, and used also of Claudius, who was said to be **coniugum imperiis obnoxio**<sup>88</sup>. In these latter two examples the word is used with contemptuous connotations, but in exonerating Nero from the charge of poisoning Poppaea, Tacitus seems to be attributing to him genuine human emotion. Since this is unusual in his treatment of Nero, it must be given a certain amount of weight.

Tacitus goes on to note that Poppaea's body was not cremated, **ut Romanus mos**<sup>89</sup>, but was embalmed, **regum externorum consuetudine**<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> 15,23

<sup>85</sup> 16,6

<sup>86</sup> Tacitus is usually ready to believe the worst of Nero, but perhaps it suits his portrayal of Nero at this point better to have him cause Poppaea's death in a fit of anger than through cold-blooded poisoning.

<sup>87</sup> 16,6

<sup>88</sup> 12,1

<sup>89</sup> 16,6

<sup>90</sup> 16,6

A note of senatorial disapproval can be detected in the choice of language here. **Romanus mos** is an idea very close to Tacitus' heart, and the use of the word **rex** in Latin literature generally carries negative connotations. Nevertheless Nero's grief does seem to be genuine, augmented perhaps by the loss of another child as a result of Poppaea's death. Her body was interred in the Julian family tomb in the Campus Martius.

Tacitus' final words on Poppaea recall her first appearance in the text, particularly the use of the word **impudicitia**, which also heralded her introduction to the narrative<sup>91</sup>. Yet again Tacitus calls attention to the fact that public appearances do not always accord with private feelings:

**Mortem Poppaeae ut palam tristem, ita recordantibus laetam ob impudicitiam eius saevitiamque...**<sup>92</sup>

Tacitus' final judgement on Poppaea is delivered by reminding the reader of her **impudicitia** and **saevitia**; like Messalina, Poppaea has no redeeming features.

In conclusion, Poppaea does indeed qualify for the epithet **dominandi avida** since she deliberately seeks power, expending all her energies in bending Nero to her will. Tacitus' depiction of her shows her to be indefatigable in the pursuit of influence over Nero, ruthless in her pursuit of her goals, and capable of murder when it is necessary to achieve her aims. There is in her nature a streak of calculation even stronger than that of Agrippina the younger, evidenced by the way in which she disposes of her favours to her best advantage. Hers is not the most detailed portrait of the three, for pride of place must go to that of Agrippina the younger, but it is at least comparable with that of Messalina. It is a measure of Tacitus' genius that the three women, Messalina, Agrippina the younger and Poppaea, are individual and quite distinct in their characterisation, despite a common ambition and strength of personality.

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<sup>91</sup> 13,45

<sup>92</sup> 16,7

CHAPTER 12: OCTAVIA.

Octavia, the wife of Nero, is a very shadowy character in the Annals, given far less prominence by Tacitus than Agrippina the younger or Messalina<sup>1</sup>. This fact opens the way to various lines of enquiry for explanation. Does Tacitus not place much importance on her because her place in history is that of a pawn in the dynastic games played by the imperial family, or because she is an insipid character in real life, or because he finds it easier, and more to his purpose, to write at length about the evil characters who make the narrative more readable?

It is probably a combination of all three reasons. Octavia is the daughter of Messalina, Claudius' third wife, and she and her brother Britannicus both meet their deaths at the hands of Nero, the son of Agrippina the younger, Claudius' fourth wife.

Messalina leads a flagrantly immoral life, so much so that even a complaisant husband like Claudius can no longer ignore her misdeeds, and he has her put to death.

**...haud multo post flagitia uxoris noscere ac punire adactus est...**<sup>2</sup>

Even at this early juncture Octavia and Britannicus are used by Messalina as pawns in her desperation when she realises that she has gone too far in her pursuit of pleasure, and that Claudius is set on her punishment. She attempts to soften his heart by appealing to him through their children.

**haud segniter intendit misitque ut Britannicus et Octavia in complexum patris pergerent.**<sup>3</sup>

Octavia is only nine years old at this stage, but already she is a victim of the power plays within the imperial family, and that is to be her role throughout her short life. Britannicus and Octavia are mentioned again in the course of the discussion concerning Claudius' next wife, after the death of Messalina. Again they are not characterised in any way, merely

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<sup>1</sup> The same lack of attention is discernible in the secondary sources.

<sup>2</sup> 11,25

<sup>3</sup> 11,32

mentioned as obstacles or otherwise in regard to the three rivals for the role of Claudius' wife. In the case of Aelia Paetina

**haudquaquam novercalibus odiis visura Britannicum, Octaviam, proxima suis pignora.**<sup>4</sup>

In the duplicitous atmosphere of the court, one is inclined to doubt whether in fact this would have been the case, but in the event, Aelia Paetina loses her bid to remarry Claudius, and instead Agrippina becomes a force in Octavia's life.

In the dynastic manoeuvrings of the imperial house, Claudius had previously betrothed Octavia in infancy<sup>5</sup> to Lucius Junius Silanus, a great-grandson of Augustus, but Agrippina has other plans in mind. She sets about removing Silanus from the scene so that Octavia can be betrothed to Nero, thereby enhancing his chances for the throne. Agrippina has Silanus accused of incest with his sister, Junia Calvina, and Claudius therefore breaks off the engagement<sup>6</sup>.

**hinc initium accusationis; fratrumque non incestum, sed incustoditum amorem infamiam traxit.**<sup>7</sup>

The irony in this situation is very obvious since a senatorial decree has just made possible the incestuous marriage of Claudius and Agrippina, who are uncle and niece.

In fact, having been expelled from the Senate and forced to lay down his praetorship as a result of the machinations of Vitellius and Agrippina, Silanus commits suicide on the day of Agrippina's and Claudius' marriage, and here Tacitus employs his frequent technique of the loaded alternative<sup>8</sup>, where the second alternative is generally the one that Tacitus prefers.

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<sup>4</sup> 12,2

<sup>5</sup> Treggiari 1991:154 (List B)

<sup>6</sup> Treggiari 1991:156-157 (List B)

<sup>7</sup> 12,4

<sup>8</sup> See Whitehead 1979:474 (List A)

**die nuptiarum Silanus mortem sibi conscivit, sive eo usque spem vitae produxerat, seu delecto die augendam ad invidiam.<sup>9</sup>**

The way is now clear for the betrothal of Nero and Octavia and a willing consul designate is found to propose a petition,

**qua oraretur Claudius despondere Octaviam Domitio, quod aetati utriusque non absurdum et maiora patefacturum erat.<sup>10</sup>**

So far in the narrative Octavia is nothing but a name; not a single adjective or characterising phrase has been applied to her. Tacitus is demonstrating clearly how she is being manipulated by others all the time, and how little significance is attached to her as a personality.

This continues, even when Tacitus is recording the marriage between Octavia and Nero. There is no mention of the ceremony, merely the bare fact of the marriage.

**D. Iunio Q. Haterio consulibus sedecim annos natus Nero Octaviam Caesaris filiam in matrimonium accepit.<sup>11</sup>**

The only description afforded here of Octavia is that of her parentage, since nothing else about her matters<sup>12</sup>. She is always seen in terms of someone else, as a daughter or a sister, never as a person in her own right. When Claudius dies, or according to Tacitus, is murdered<sup>13</sup>, his children are detained by Agrippina so that she can ensure Nero's accession to the throne.

**Antoniam quoque et Octaviam sorores eius attinuit...<sup>14</sup>**

The **eius** referred to is Britannicus, and once again Octavia is defined in terms of someone else.

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<sup>9</sup> 12,8

<sup>10</sup> 12,9

<sup>11</sup> 12,58

<sup>12</sup> See Treggiari 1991:116 (List B) for the family ties between Octavia and Nero.

<sup>13</sup> See Levick 1990:77 (List B). See also chapter 8.

<sup>14</sup> 12,68

On the first occasion when she is described as something more than an appendage of another character, Octavia is still first of all defined as Nero's wife.

**quando uxore ab Octavia, nobili quidem et probitatis spectatae, fato quodam an quia praevalent inlicita, abhorrebat.**<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, this is the first instance in which she is credited with qualities of her own. In view of the fact that she is married to Nero, **probitas spectata** is probably the least useful attribute that she could have. Indeed, in the two reasons that Tacitus gives for Nero's distaste for her, the second, longer alternative is undoubtedly the one that Tacitus favours, and the one that he intends his readers to select<sup>16</sup>.

Octavia's next appearance is at the feast during which her brother Britannicus dies, poisoned by Nero, according to Tacitus<sup>17</sup>. Agrippina and Octavia are linked by their horror of and ignorance prior to the deed but for the first time, we are given some comment on Octavia herself.

**Octavia quoque, quamvis rudibus annis, dolorem caritatem, omnis adfectus abscondere didicerat.**<sup>18</sup>

Life in the imperial family had taught her some form of self-preservation for survival but it is such a harsh lesson that the reader feels only sympathy for her. As a consequence of Britannicus' death, Agrippina becomes a supporter of Octavia, but nothing is said about Octavia's feelings, either about her brother's death or having Agrippina as a supporter. Nonetheless, Agrippina does provide some sort of protection for Octavia against Nero, since he does not dare to divorce her while Agrippina is still alive. Poppaea is fully aware of this and she hounds Nero until he finally takes action and murders his mother<sup>19</sup>. Tacitus ignores the fact that Nero does not divorce Octavia<sup>20</sup> and marry Poppaea straightaway; in

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<sup>15</sup> 13,12

<sup>16</sup> See footnote 8.

<sup>17</sup> See also Suetonius: Nero 33 and Titus 2 and Dio Cassius 61,7.

<sup>18</sup> 13,16

<sup>19</sup> See chapter 11. Suetonius: Nero 34 says that Agrippina's own behaviour caused Nero to murder her: **verum minis eius ac violentia territus perdere statuit.**

<sup>20</sup> For Burrus' opposition to the divorce, see Dio Cassius 62,13. Burrus tells Nero that if he divorces Octavia, he will have to return her dowry, in other words, the empire.

fact, it is three years before Nero takes the final step<sup>21</sup>. The murder of Agrippina takes up such a disproportionate amount of the narrative that the reader forgets that the ostensible reason behind the murder is Nero's wish to marry Poppaea. Tacitus does not return to the topic of Nero's divorce from Octavia and subsequent marriage to Poppaea until after he has dealt with various intervening matters, including Boudicca's rebellion.

It is at this point, when Nero divorces Octavia, and harries her to her death, that Tacitus has to enlist the sympathies of the reader on her behalf so as to underline the repugnance of Nero's crime<sup>22</sup>. It is too late to build her up into a fully fledged character, so she remains the archetypal victim, unable to oppose the forces ranged against her.

Tacitus does this by recounting Poppaea's attempts to bring against Octavia false accusations of adultery with a flute player. As a result of this accusation, some of Octavia's maids are tortured, and although some of them make false confessions,

**plures perstitere sanctitatem dominae tueri.**<sup>23</sup>

This gives some idea of her capacity to inspire loyalty, and also of her undoubted innocence, but it unfortunately does not help Octavia. A civil divorce takes place, **sterilem dictitans**, and this in itself is another example of the ways in which Octavia differs from some of the other imperial women I have dealt with, in that it has often been their fertility that has been under the spotlight. Nero makes substantial gifts to her to give credence to the charade<sup>24</sup>.

**movetur tamen primo civilis discidii specie domumque Burri, praedia Plauti, infausta dona accipit...**<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Griffin 1984:98-99 (List B) and Warmington 1969:50 (List B) both cite the link that Octavia provides with Claudius as the reason for Nero's hesitation in divorcing her. Griffin also cites the necessity for Nero to eliminate the other possible claimants to his throne, Cornelius Sulla and Rubellius Plautus.

<sup>22</sup> See Grant 1970:140 (List B)

<sup>23</sup> 14,60

<sup>24</sup> Treggiari 1991:466 (List B)

<sup>25</sup> 14,60

More ominously, however, she is soon removed to Campania, **addita militari custodia**<sup>26</sup>. This move provokes a public outcry on Octavia's behalf and seems to have some effect on Nero:

**tamquam Nero paenitentia flagitii coniugem revocarit Octaviam.**<sup>27</sup>

But the **tamquam** gives it away. As we have seen before, duplicity is the hallmark of the court, and the popular uprising<sup>28</sup> in favour of Octavia is quickly put down, **verberibus et intento ferro**<sup>29</sup>. Indeed, the uprising is termed **sedition** in the next sentence, presumably an indication of Poppaea's influence over Nero, as she plays on his fears of rebellion and underlines Octavia's importance to his opponents. There are reminiscences here of the position of Agrippina the elder, widow of Germanicus, who was always regarded by Tiberius and Livia as a possible focus for disaffection of their opponents<sup>30</sup>. In all this, Octavia herself never makes a move; all the action comes from Poppaea and Nero. Nero bribes Anicetus, **maternae necis patrator**<sup>31</sup>, to admit to adultery with Octavia, and then charges her not only with adultery, but with procuring an abortion<sup>32</sup>. Tacitus notes Nero's inconsistency in accusing Octavia of procuring an abortion in the phrase

**...incusatae paulo ante sterilitatis oblitus...**<sup>33</sup>

The use of **sterilitas** with reference to Octavia is a striking example of the manner in which Octavia is contrasted with other imperial women. **Fecunditas** is used time and time again of Agrippina the elder<sup>34</sup> and at least once of her daughter<sup>35</sup>. It is true that Octavia did not

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<sup>26</sup> 14,60

<sup>27</sup> 14,60

<sup>28</sup> See Levick 1990:113 (List B) for the affection felt by the populace for Octavia.

<sup>29</sup> 14,61

<sup>30</sup> See chapter 6. It is clear, however, that Agrippina was a much more forceful character than Octavia and consequently Tiberius' fears were better founded than Nero's.

<sup>31</sup> 14,62

<sup>32</sup> See Dixon 1988:62 (List B) for the Roman view on abortion as either depriving a husband of his rights over his legitimate offspring or concealing adultery. She says that abortion "was suspect because of its association with adultery and because it suggested female inroads on a male preserve - that of deciding the fate of legitimate issue."

<sup>33</sup> 14,63

<sup>34</sup> 1,41; 2,43; 2,75; 4,12.

<sup>35</sup> 12,2

have any children, but the reason for that is by no means certain<sup>36</sup>. Despite Nero's inconsistency, thereafter Octavia is exiled to Pandateria.

She is still a victim, eliciting a reaction from others by her existence alone, not by anything she does herself. Tacitus illustrates this when he says

**non alia exul visentium oculos maiore misericordia adfecit.**<sup>37</sup>

The alliteration of **maiore misericordia** underlines the strength of the emotion she engendered in other people, but she takes no advantage of it. Tacitus' treatment of her calls to mind Livy's depiction of Verginia<sup>38</sup>; she too is a mute victim, offering not a single word in her own defence. Octavia is the same sort of character, acted upon rather than acting; a symbol rather than a real person. Octavia is an island of goodness in a sea of iniquity, but she too is eventually overwhelmed by the superior forces of evil ranged against her<sup>39</sup>.

Tacitus pinpoints the crucial moment of her life, from which all her troubles flow,

**huic primum nuptiarum dies loco funeris fuit**<sup>40</sup>,

emphasising her misfortune by contrasting it with the normal happiness associated with a wedding day. By the juxtaposition of **nuptiarum** and **funeris**, occasions in a woman's life which should, under normal circumstances, be far apart both in time and in emotional content, Tacitus underlines how far Octavia's life was from the norm.

The opening sentence of chapter 64 is full of contrasts, all adding to the pathetic effect that Tacitus is building up around the death of Octavia:

**Ac puella vicesimo aetatis anno inter centuriones et milites, praesagio malorum iam vitae exempta, nondum tamen morte adquiescebat.**

<sup>36</sup> Grant 1970:140 (List B) suggests that either Octavia was infertile or Nero could not bring himself to do his part.

<sup>37</sup> 14,63

<sup>38</sup> Livy: **Ab urbe condita** 3,44 et seqq.

<sup>39</sup> Walker 1968:80 (List B) comments on Octavia's life as follows: "...Octavia, whose life was irreproachable, can be slandered, tortured and unavenged, while the abominable Anicetus meets with an opulent exile and natural death. The perversion of moral standards can be carried no further."

<sup>40</sup> 14,63

**Puella** is contrasted with **centuriones et milites**, exciting the reader's pity for Octavia, while to describe a nineteen year old girl as **exempta vitae** goes against all that such a girl should be able to expect from life. Even the peace of death is denied to her for a while, but again, the phrase **morte adquiescere** is not among the normal expectations of such a girl and by employing it Tacitus calls upon the reader's pity for her. When the order to die comes, Octavia for the first time acts on her own behalf when she declares herself to be Nero's wife no longer, only his sister, and calls upon her family connections, even Agrippina who had afforded her some sort of protection.

**...cum iam viduam se et tantum sororem testaretur communisque Germanicos et postremo Agrippinae nomen cieret, qua incolumi infelix quidem matrimonium sed sine exitio pertulisset.**<sup>41</sup>

But it is all in vain. The verbs become passive, or in the case of **labebatur**, passive-looking, as Octavia is murdered.

**restringitur vinclis venaque eius per omnis artus exolvuntur; et quia pressus pavore sanguis tardius labebatur, praefervidi balnei vapore enecatur. Additurque atrocior saevitia quod caput amputatum latumque in urbem Poppaea vidit.**<sup>42</sup>

Poppaea is the subject of the only active verb in this passage, and this is fitting since she is the chief architect of Octavia's downfall. Poppaea has been the complete antithesis to Octavia in Tacitus' account; bold, brash and self-seeking in contrast to Octavia's total self-abnegation. Tacitus has accentuated the contrast between them and has depicted Octavia as the ultimate victim of the scheming women of the imperial circle. He does not even attempt to bring her to life as a personality, and by this deliberate tactic he underlines her essential helplessness<sup>43</sup>. Tacitus underlines the depths to which Nero's court has sunk by

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<sup>41</sup> 14,64

<sup>42</sup> 14,64

<sup>43</sup> Walker 1968:159-160 (List B) comments as follows on Tacitus' treatment of Octavia's death: "If Germanicus' death was perhaps a brutal injustice, so certainly was Octavia's; Tacitus writes of that episode with feeling indeed, but much less is made of it than of Germanicus' sad and tactless end."

recording the thank-offerings given in the temples after Octavia's murder; the normal moral values of the world are completely reversed:

**...quoties fugas et caedes iussit princeps, toties grates deis actas, quaeque rerum secundarum olim, tum publicae cladis insignia fuisse.**<sup>44</sup>

It is noteworthy that this passage in **oratio obliqua** immediately follows one of Tacitus' rare first person authorial outbursts, the outraged rhetorical question **...memorabimus?**, and the direction to his readers **...praesumptum habeant**.

For Tacitus, Octavia is a symbol of this reversal of values rather than a three-dimensional character, like Agrippina or even Poppaea. For him, she serves her purpose well enough without being depicted in any detail. She is always a pawn, a cipher, in the greater designs of others, never a player in her own right. Least of all the women dealt with in this study could she be labelled **dominandi avida**.

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<sup>44</sup> 14,64

### CHAPTER 13: CONCLUSION

As a result of this study various themes which were important to Tacitus have presented themselves. By virtue of the material selected, the most obvious is the idea of the strong, powerful, almost masculine woman, who is in every way the converse of the ideal Roman woman discussed in chapter 2. It is true that Tacitus found the characters in his material, but it seems to me that for him they were symptomatic of the times that he was writing about, and consequently he used them in his narrative to epitomise the changes that had taken place in Roman society with the establishment of the principate. Since the principate is perhaps the most important theme throughout the Annals, exemplified by the constant use of words such as **dominatio**, **regnum**, and **servitium**, Tacitus is able through his portrayal of these women to comment upon the system that provided the conditions under which they flourished.

Never before had Roman women had the opportunity to wield direct power, but the advent of one-man rule opened up opportunities for women close to the throne to do so in a way that had never been possible before. What is remarkable is not that certain women took advantage of these new possibilities, but the fact that the period produced so many women who were **dominandi avidae**; the gallery of Tacitus' female characters speaks for itself. His achievement consists in depicting each one of them as an individual personality, while recognising their common characteristics.

Livia and Agrippina the younger perhaps best epitomise the strong, almost masculine character, seeking after power for its own sake, while others, such as Messalina and Poppaea, seek power for their own purposes, to fulfil their own desires and ambitions. Agrippina the elder, in my opinion, shows admirable qualities of courage and strength, which may be regarded as more stereotypically masculine characteristics, but she lacks the single-mindedness in pursuit of a defined goal so apparent in the women previously mentioned. Boudicca displays yet another aspect of what might be called the masculine

woman in her direct uncomplicated reaction to a personal injustice, and she responds in a masculine way, through action, against the perpetrators of the injustice.

Only Octavia, of the women under discussion, cannot be described as a masculine kind of woman, and I have included her partly because her story is so intertwined with that of Agrippina the younger and Poppaea, and partly as a foil to the others, since she comes closest to the ideal of the Roman woman who is emphatically not **dominandi avida**.

On reading Tacitus' accounts of these various women, one becomes aware of various language patterns and narrative techniques common to all of them. Perhaps the most striking is his differentiated use of the words **mulier** and **femina**; **mulier** and its cognates are used when the nuance is derogatory or pejorative, while **femina** appears when the tone is laudatory or neutral. After constant repetition in the same context, the words themselves take on the good or bad connotations for the reader.

Also noteworthy is Tacitus' use of words not generally associated with women to describe women who do not conform to the norms of female behaviour. **Atrocitas**, **ferocia** and their cognates are not usually associated with women, but Tacitus uses them on several occasions and in so doing illustrates just how far from the expected norms the woman in question has moved. Conversely, **pudicitia** and **fecunditas** are linked with the ideal Roman woman and when used reverberate with these associations.

Verbs, too, through cumulative use in a certain context take on those connotations. **Devincire** is a case in point. It is used frequently of strong characters overwhelming weaker ones, often through devious means, and in the passive sense is used to denote enslavement to others, and therefore weakness of character. **Moliri** comes to mean not just striving but striving for evil ends and after constant repetition in such contexts seems to have no neutral meaning at all.

Apart from language patterns, Tacitus uses certain narrative techniques to influence and direct his reader's reaction to his material. Since selection and presentation of material are the historian's main tools in conveying his point of view, the methods he uses to do this are of considerable interest. Two of Tacitus' most characteristic methods throughout the *Annals* are those of the loaded alternative and the use of impersonal expressions and unidentified spokesmen. In the case of the former, Tacitus gives alternative reasons, but develops one at the expense of the other, so that the reader comes to believe that the more detailed one must be the one that Tacitus favours. In the case of the latter, Tacitus uses the technique to expose the reader to information that he does not wish to omit, but for which he does not wish to take responsibility. In this connection he uses rumours and phrases such as **creditur**, **ferunt** and so on.

It is paradoxical that a period in history such as the early Roman empire, which was so quintessentially masculine in its outlook, should prove such a fertile breeding ground for a considerable number of exceptionally strong female characters. Tacitus' depiction of these women is so vivid that his is the picture that has survived for posterity and that alone is a measure of his genius.

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**Appendix**

**Livy Books 1 - 5**

**Characterisation and Style in Relation  
to Women: A Study**

**ANN DELANY**

**Latin Honours**

One of the aspects of Livy that strikes the reader most forcibly while reading his **Ab Urbe Condita** is the pre-eminence that he gives to the characters and personalities in the story that he is telling. For him, the history of Rome is an historical drama, and the varying fortunes of the city are explicable mainly in terms of the people involved, through the qualities inherent in their characters, both good and bad, which led them to act as they did. In the words of T J Luce, "For him it was the people who counted most: not simply what they did but in what frame of mind they did it." <sup>a</sup>

In the Preface Livy gives his reasons for attempting such a monumental task, saying that he will derive satisfaction, if not recognition, from contributing to the task of recording the story of the greatest nation in the world. This outlook is evident throughout his work - an undeviating belief in the greatness of Rome, and allied to it is a belief that the old Roman virtues are largely responsible for securing that greatness. Being uncomfortably aware that these virtues are no longer so evident in the Rome of his day, he hopes to draw the attention of his readers to their importance in the story of Rome's past, and therefore to the necessity of reviving them in his day, if Rome is to remain great. He says explicitly

**Hoc illud est praecipue in cognitione rerum salubre ac frugiferum, omnis te exempli documenta in inlustri posita monumento intueri; inde tibi tuaeque rei publicae quod imitere capias, inde foedum inceptu foedum exitu quod vites.**<sup>1</sup>

Livy did not choose to harangue his readers with long discourses on good and evil and their effects on the history of Rome; instead he used the characters of the people who took part in the events making up the history of Rome, and by telling the individual episodes vividly and concentrating his interest in the people involved, he was able to make his point in more telling fashion.

In Books 1-5 Livy is writing about the distant past, and he states that it is not his purpose to support or reject the received tradition; in his own words

**Quae ante conditam condendamve urbem poeticis magis decora fabulis quam incorruptis rerum gestarum monumentis traduntur, ea nec adfirmare nec refellere in animo est.**<sup>2</sup>

The fact that he is dealing with the distant past does not make his tale a dry, dusty chronicle; in some ways it allows him to give greater freedom to his imagination and powers of narration in filling out the bare bones of the tradition, and fleshing out the characters to bring the past to life. The more vividly he could paint the past for his readers, the more likely he was to bring home the message that the virtues that had made Rome great, such as **virtus**, **pudicitia**, **fides**, **pietas** and **moderatio**, were still needed in his own day, and that the vices exemplified in some of his characters, such as **temeritas**, **libido** and **ferocia**, needed to be guarded against just as keenly as in the past. Since the qualities that he is focusing on recur, the characters that he portrays are often similar; for example, both Tanaquil and Tullia are ambitious, greedy women whose excessive aspirations lead them to persuade their husbands to commit crimes at their urging. The period that Livy is dealing with at this stage is shrouded in the mists of antiquity, even for him, and he is creating characters from the traditional material of legend. The modern reader may be glad to know that the tradition of Etruscan kings at Rome is well attested by archaeological evidence, and the name Tarquin is of undoubted Etruscan origin, since this is part of our modern attitude to history, but Livy's objective is to make the characters of the old tradition come to life in his pages, and by using the bare bones of the legend he creates believable characters.

Before examining Livy's style and characterisation in relation to women, it will be necessary to give a brief summary of the position of women in Roman society so as to illustrate how the Romans generally viewed their womenfolk, and how Livy has used this to bring out nuances of character. To appreciate this fully we have to bring

to the reading of his work as much of the same knowledge of the social background that a Roman reader would have had as we can.

Legally speaking, the social system of the Romans was a patriarchy, in which the **paterfamilias**, as head of the family unit, held all power and authority under the law in his hands. This presupposed a belief that women were in every way the weaker sex, and consequently that every woman needed protection by a male, be it a husband or father or some other male relative.

Roman marriage was a continuation of the system of paternal protection and authority, in which the Roman father had complete and absolute power over his children. He could, and did, arrange marriages for his children, without consulting them, and they had no legal option but to obey. On her marriage, a daughter passed from the **manus**, or authority, of her father to that of her husband, and she was expected to live out her whole life in perpetual tutelage. If the direct line of her male progenitors died out, a "legitimate guardian" had to be appointed for her from among her male relations, so that at no time was she without male protection. Livy refers to this tradition in the story of Verginia, where the whole action turns on the absence of her father, or male protector.

The main reason underpinning this restrictive authority imposed on women in Roman society was the necessity to ensure the legitimacy of all the children in a family, since the system of primogeniture did not apply. For this reason it was of vital importance that a girl should be a virgin on her marriage, and that she should be chaste and faithful to her husband during the marriage. Under ideal conditions, the position of women in Roman society was more dignified than their position in Greek society. The married woman was the true mistress of her household, supervising everything that went on inside it. Her responsibilities were heavy, but if she carried them out competently and in such a manner as to reflect well on her

husband, she was entitled to a great deal of respect. In the story of Lucretia, her adherence to the traditional role and duties of the Roman wife is strongly contrasted with the moral turpitude of the man who seeks to subvert the moral values contained in them.

Roman women did not suffer the same extremes of seclusion as did Athenian women of the fifth and fourth centuries BC; in fact, they went out a fair amount, escorted by menfolk or slaves, and they met men who were not relatives at dinner parties. Underlying this relative freedom, however, was the ideal of Roman womanhood, pure, chaste and obedient. Women exercised their influence mainly within the family circle, and generally owed any power they had to the man who gave them status. This is exemplified in the characters of Tullia and Tanaquil, who both suffer greatly from *ambitio*, and to our eyes, are amazingly modern in their attempts to urge their husbands to greater heights. Both of them, however, devote their energies to improving the position of their husbands, for this is the only way open to them to reach greater heights themselves. In some women, this seems to have brought out a manipulative streak, since they could not attain their ambitions on their own merits, but only on those of their husbands. In strong characters like Tanaquil and Tullia this might be seen as a leadership quality more suited to a masculine character. Both women assume the role of leader in their relationships with their husbands, Tullia perhaps more so than Tanaquil, whose husband is ambitious on his own account. Tanaquil and Tullia exercise this resoluteness of character for bad, ambitious reasons, but Lucretia displays the same resolve in her determination to uphold virtuous standards, in other words, for good, moral reasons.

Before going on to examine some of the women in Books 1-5, it is also necessary to indicate the broad outlines of Livy's style and the background of historiography against which he was writing. In the structure of his history, Livy followed the form of the *Annales Maximi*, which were records of important events kept by the Pontifex

Maximus, along with the names of the consuls for each year. Mucius Scaevola collected and published as many of these records as were available in about 123 BC, and this authoritative framework served as a model for historians thereafter. The **Annales** were, therefore, a chronological record of the events of any given year, and Livy uses this basic framework in all his books. It provided him with a linking mechanism, and the lists of officeholders provided a contrast to the more dramatic episodes of his story, thereby allowing interludes of more commonplace items to heighten the effect of the great events or the more human incidents.

Stylistically, perhaps the greatest influence on Livy was Cicero. They shared the view that history was an important field of study as a witness to the past, and a light to the future. Cicero did not, however, see history as a mere relation of events in chronological order. For it to fulfill the higher purpose he saw for it, more was needed, and so far no one had undertaken the task successfully. To quote A H McDonald

"The task of presenting Roman history called for greater rhetorical skill and a finer literary style. Cicero defined the programme, Livy carried it out." <sup>b</sup>

The programme that Cicero defined involved the building up of the historical narrative - *exaedificatio* - and then the embellishment of it - *exornatio* - so that the narrative became more than a mere listing of events and names, and exhibited a dignity worthy of the subject matter. Cicero demanded that the historian should provide a full and systematic account of events which would convince the reader of its reality and probability.<sup>c</sup> In the context of this study, one of the most important points he made was that the author might include speeches to heighten the dramatic effect of his narrative, or to bring out the character of the people he was writing about. Livy was therefore able to choose whether to report the speeches of his characters in direct or indirect speech, and his choice would depend on various factors, such as the sweep of the narrative, or the effect that direct speech would

have on his readers in bringing the characters to life. Besides allowing insights into the characters of the people in his narrative, the use of speeches also allowed Livy to show the effect his characters had on other people. A striking example of this is the speech of Tanaquil to her son-in-law, Servius Tullius, after the death of her husband Tarquin. By the skilful use of direct speech, Livy shows how Tanaquil's taunts persuade Servius Tullius to fall in with her plans. This example displays not only Tanaquil's strong character, but also her ability to influence others to act as she desires. Livy's interest in his characters as people has already been mentioned, as well as his ability to see the various episodes he was writing about as dramatic entities; the combination of these two characteristics enabled him to discard any extraneous matter in his source which detracted from the impact of the scene, and also to highlight those elements which added to it. It is instructive to read the accounts by Dionysius of Halicarnassus of the episodes from the first five books of Livy which are under consideration here. Livy's sense of the dramatic is completely absent in Dionysius' writing, and it is interesting to see how the two authors deal with the same basic facts in different ways. Livy appeals to the emotions of his readers, much as a playwright inspires in his audience feelings of pity, horror or sympathy for his characters.

Livy's style involved the use of full, well balanced sentences, where the arrangement of the various subordinate clauses mirrored the clarity of the action. This "periodic" style allowed the narrative to flow freely and logically, with the emphasis placed just where the author wanted it to be, and granting the accompanying action or description its importance from its position in the sentence. Livy did not, however, use this style without variation; frequently an episode will be introduced or concluded with a single short sentence which has more impact simply because of the contrast with the longer sentences which precede or follow it. An example of this occurs at the end of the episode of Veturia and Coriolanus -

**complexus inde suos dimittit: ipse retro ab urbe castra movit.**<sup>3</sup>

These two short, unadorned sentences contrast vividly with the preceding speech of Veturia and the description of the weeping of the women, and the juxtaposition of the two heightens the effect of both.

In studying some of the episodes in the first five books which concern women it will be obvious that Livy allowed himself to use poetic, colloquial or even archaic words and phrases when the occasion demanded it, so as to imbue his writing with the necessary dignity and variety to maintain the interest of his reader. When Livy deals with the distant past in the First Decade, "where he may have thought of his work as the "prose epic" of Rome"<sup>d</sup> there is a distinct poetic flavour in the narrative which befits the legendary nature of much of his material.

Having briefly outlined the position of women in Roman society, and some of the more striking aspects of Livy's style, it is now appropriate to study some of the episodes concerning women in the first five books in more detail, and draw some conclusions from them about Livy's attitude to women.

### Tanaquil:

Tarquin was an Etruscan whose father emigrated to Etruria from Greece, so his links with Etruria were not very strong, and when his ambitious aristocratic wife, Tanaquil, suggested that they should move to Rome, where the opportunities for fulfilling both their ambitions were greater, he had little difficulty in following her advice. Here Livy uses indirect speech to enumerate her reasons for leaving Tarquinii, one of which seem to the reader to be surprisingly modern in tone - **in novo populo, ubi omnis repentina atque ex virtute nobilitas sit, futurum locum forte ac strenuo viro.**<sup>4</sup> Having listed her reasons for seeking new pastures Livy encapsulates her success in persuading her husband in one short matter-of-fact sentence.

**Sublatis itaque rebus amigrant Romam.**<sup>5</sup>

Tanaquil was not only ambitious, but a great opportunist as well, as is seen by her reaction to the incident of the eagle. Having portrayed the scene in very visual terms, with the couple seated on the cart and the bird swooping down from the sky, Livy allows Tanaquil to react in a most unRoman, and even unEtruscan way, (despite the fact that he says that the Etruscans were skilled at reading the omens) by having her interpret the sign. The position of the word **mulier** here is significant since it assumes added importance by being placed at the end of the sentence, thereby emphasising the unusualness of Tanaquil's behaviour. Here Livy's debt is to the prophetic women of Greek mythology,<sup>e</sup> where women were able to read the omens. Tanaquil seizes the opportunity to present the incident as fore-telling great things for her husband in the future. Livy does not interrupt the narrative with direct speech as she explains the omen to Tarquin. Instead he uses Oratio Obliqua - **eam alitem ea regione caeli et eius dei nuntiam venisse**<sup>6</sup>

and the repetition of different cases of the same demonstrative adjective, or anaphora, almost gives the feeling of an incantation, which suits the religious flavour of the reading of the omens.

Certainly Tarquin sets about making his wife's prophecy come true and before long he is accepted in the highest circles in the city. By fraud he secures the throne for himself, no doubt with Tanaquil's connivance, but she does not appear again until another prodigy occurs, and her ability to read the omens is again required. The second omen is that of the King's Fire, of which there were many examples in Roman legend. The King's Fire was a circlet of flame, which appeared in this case on the head of the sleeping boy, Servius Tullius. In a foreshadowing of the circumstances surrounding her husband's death, Tanaquil takes command of the situation, calming the excited spectators and forbidding them to wake the boy. Here again Tanaquil sees the importance of the omen for the future of her husband's

fortunes, and using her strong influence over him once more, she persuades him to treat Servius Tullius as a royal prince. In contrast to the incident of the eagle, here Livy uses *Oratio Recta* which heightens the atmosphere of secrecy and impassioned urging. Once more Livy puts formal language into her mouth, language which suits the serious nature of her prophecy for Servius Tullius.

**Scire licet hunc lumen quondam rebus nostris dubiis futurum praesidiumque regiae adflictae;**<sup>7</sup>

The third and final incident in which her strong character is again in evidence occurs on the death of her husband. When Tarquin is murdered at the instigation of Ancus' sons, Tanaquil takes charge of the situation at once, making preparations as if to nurse Tarquin back to health, and subsequently urging Servius to take over as regent by appealing, in vivid, direct speech, to his manhood.

**Tuum est, Servi, si vir es, regnum, non eorum qui alienibus manibus pessimum facinus facere.**<sup>8</sup>

The striking word order and the taunt *si vir es* are calculated to inspire Servius to seize the opportunity that is offered and make the most of it. She exhorts him to act in order to fulfill the greatness predicted by the omen of the fire. The strength of her character is beyond doubt when she tells him to do as she says if he has no ideas of his own.

**Si tua re subita consilia torpent, at tu mea consilia sequere.**<sup>9</sup>

Here hyperbaton, or the transposition of words from their natural order for the purpose of emphasis, is used to emphasise *tua*, leaving the reader in no doubt that Tanaquil herself has no difficulty in thinking and planning ahead under stress. Finally she speaks to the crowd, convincing them with her matter-of-fact manner that all will be well, and that she is in control of the situation, as indeed she is. Her speech to the crowd is in *Oratio Obliqua*, and in a series of plain, simple sentences she calms and reassures the populace that everything is under control, while at the same time she directs their loyalty to Servius Tullius, as

part of her grand design.

Taking all the incidents in which she participates into account, it can be seen that Livy has painted a picture of a very forceful, resourceful character who can turn every opportunity to her advantage. Here is a woman whose overweening ambition has driven her to use her strong influence over her husband on every possible occasion, and later to conceive and carry through a deception on a grand scale to satisfy her desires, but who is quick-witted and intelligent enough to see and seize the opportunity inherent in every situation. Although Livy may have chosen to depict Tanaquil as an example of **ambitio** carried too far, he has been so successful in drawing her character that to the reader she is one of his most interesting and modern personalities.

### Tullia

Tullia is a similar personality to Tanaquil, another excessively ambitious woman, but Livy has added a touch of peevishness to her character which we do not find in his portrayal of Tanaquil. In his first mention of Tullia as an individual, she is characterised by the adjective **ferox**, which is usually used to describe a warrior or an animal, rather than a woman, and generally has hostile connotations. The verb used to describe her frustration - **angebatur** - is a strong, unusual word and illustrates the strength of her emotions. Livy says that she is incensed because her sister is lacking in **muliebri audacia**, which is a striking example of oxymoron, since women were not generally noted for their **audacia** in Roman society. Livy then uses a phrase in asyndeton to end the list of Tullia's frustrations when he says **malum malo aptissimum**<sup>10</sup>, where the alliteration of all the m sounds portends evil, and the reader is forewarned that the alliance of the younger Tullia and the older Tarquin will have illicit or immoral consequences. Tullia's discontent with her unambitious husband is so strong that, at her instigation, she and her brother-in-law arrange the

murders of their respective spouses, so as to enable them to marry. Here Livy uses extended *Oratio Obliqua* to enumerate Tullia's arguments to her brother-in-law so skilfully that the reader can almost hear her voice. Having gained the husband she considers worthy of her, in a speech full of Roman incentives to arouse her husband's ambition, she proceeds to incite him to attempt to gain the throne for himself. Here Livy uses an interesting combination of indirect and direct speech, beginning with the former and, on reaching the climax of her argument, breaking into direct speech and calling on very emotive images to rouse his ambition.

**di te penates patrique et patris imago et domus regia et in domo regale solium et nomen Tarquinium creat vocatque regem.**<sup>11</sup>

The use here of polysyndeton, or repetition of conjunctions, lends weight to her argument and the cumulative effect of the list of symbols is heightened by it.

Tullia sees Tanaquil as her model, and is incensed by the idea that she, a royal princess, should have less influence in the making and unmaking of kings than Tanaquil, a foreigner. This is where the difference between Tanaquil and Tullia becomes apparent, since Tullia believes that she has a right to better status, while Tanaquil is prepared to rely on her own ability to make opportunities for herself and her husband to improve their status. Tullia will stop at nothing, including murder, to gain her ends, and Livy uses her example to show that once a character has abandoned all moral restraint in pursuit of a vice, in this case, **ambitio**, it is, in fact, a form of madness.

Tullia's husband, Tarquin, makes his bid for power in the Senate and amid the ensuing chaos, he hurls the aged Servius down the steps. At this point Livy suggests that Tullia was responsible for ordering his murder -

**creditur, quia non abhorret a cetero scelere, admonitu Tulliae id factum,**<sup>12</sup>

and given the picture that he has painted of her character, the allegation is all too credible. Worse is to follow, as Tullia descends to madness as she drives over the

body of her father, **agitantibus furiis sororis ac viri**,<sup>13</sup> the memory of her previous crimes leading her to the one by which she will always be remembered. In describing the scene of Tullia, in her madness, driving over the body of her father, Livy provokes revulsion for her action in his readers, prefacing the gory image with the words -

**Foedum inhumanumque inde traditur scelus monumentoque locus est**<sup>14</sup>

words which prepare the reader for an act which cannot be condoned, and from which he can only be expected to recoil. The graphic description of Tullia in her cart - **cruento vehiculo, contaminata ipsa respersaque**<sup>15</sup> - leaves the reader with a striking visual image of the scene.

Tanaquil and Tullia are, for Livy, object lessons to show his readers to what devastating lengths ambition can drive a character. Tanaquil achieves her ambitions by being quick-witted, and able to see the advantage to be gained for herself in every opportunity that offers itself. She is also a strong enough character to persuade her husband to carry out her plans, and consequently, on two occasions she is able to play a decisive role in securing the throne, first for her husband, and secondly for her son-in-law. Tullia is less mentally stable than Tanaquil, and although she seeks to emulate her predecessor, she does not achieve her ambitions by exploiting the opportunities that present themselves; rather she intervenes directly through criminal acts, such as murder, to achieve her objectives.

The stories of Tanaquil and Tullia are similar because both women display certain characteristics of ambition and strength of character that lead to the same results. Living as they did in a society in which women could not fulfill their own ambitions, they nevertheless used their strength of character and potential for leadership to influence their husbands. Although Livy was dealing with legends handed down over many years, he managed to draw their characters in a credible fashion, and even to differentiate between them to a certain degree, despite the similarities in his

basic material.

**Lucretia:**

In Livy's view, chastity, or **pudicitia**, was one of the most important virtues necessary for the well being of society. His own age was noted for its absence and in the first five books he told more than one tale to illustrate its value to the moral well-being of early Rome. A young girl was supposed to be chaste both before and after her marriage, and her male relatives had a responsibility to take care of her, and to maintain her chastity. Consequently, a girl carried a heavy responsibility for the honour of the family, since the loss of her honour would bring dishonour on the whole family.

Livy illustrates this attitude vividly in two stories, those of Lucretia and Verginia. The tale of Lucretia is a very old one, and its association with the expulsion of the Tarquins is as old as any records we have. Although the idea of a competition between wives was a very Hellenistic one, notably in the story of Paris and Helen of Troy, Livy depicts Lucretia as the ideal Roman wife, distilling all the qualities associated with the ideal into the description

**nocte sera deditam lanae inter lucubrantes ancillas in medio aedium sedentem inveniunt.**<sup>16</sup>

The spinning of wool had deep connotations for the Roman psyche going back to the primitive era of Roman history when the wife had to spin wool to provide clothing for her family. It epitomised all the best qualities needed in a wife, an ability to care and provide for her family, to work hard, to know and perform her duties. These ideas were so strongly evocative of the duties of a wife that they were incorporated into the Roman marriage ceremony, where the bride carried wool and a spindle, so they were deeply embedded in the psychology of both Livy and his readers. In showing Lucretia engaged in this occupation when her husband and his

friends arrive unexpectedly, Livy conveys a whole range of ideas with only one sentence, ideas showing Lucretia herself in the best possible light, and ideas concerning the place and duties of the Roman wife in society as a whole. He contrasts this with the wives of the other young nobles who were found amusing themselves at a banquet with their friends, gossiping and relaxing, and not by any stretch of the imagination carrying out their wifely duties. Lucretia continues to carry out the conventions required of the ideal wife by entertaining her husband's guests with open hospitality, and when her husband's friend arrives a few days later, she again welcomes him and acts in a manner befitting the ideal Roman wife. In a long, elaborate sentence, Livy describes the arrival of Tarquin, and the hospitality offered to him by Lucretia, and contrasts with this his actions in violation of that relationship. Tarquin is *amore ardens*,<sup>17</sup> and instead of being in control of himself with suitable Roman *gravitas*, he has let his emotions take over.

Livy describes the episode as if it were a play - the seduction scene is vivid, with Tarquin driven by passion and Lucretia fearful but adamant. The direct speech, beginning with "*Tace, Lucretia*"<sup>18</sup> adds immediacy to the scene, in direct contrast to the previous long sentence. This direct speech is followed by a string of historic infinitives in asyndeton in which Tarquin attempts to persuade Lucretia to submit. This device adds to the heightened emotion of the scene, and gives an impression of haste and secrecy. Realising that it was impossible to overcome Lucretia's opposition through fear alone, Tarquin slyly, and with great understanding of the importance of honour to her, threatens her with dishonour, and has his way. After he has left, Lucretia does not lose her head, as one might expect of a woman brought up in a society where women were not encouraged to be independent or to take care of themselves. As in the instances of Tanaquil and Tullia she shows a masculine resolution and coolness under stress, sending straight away for her closest male relatives, telling them to bring their faithful friends, knowing that they could not refuse to avenge this damage to her honour. Briefly, in language reminiscent of

tragedy, she tells them what has happened, and here again, for the sake of the drama, Livy uses direct speech.

**Vestigia viri alieni, Collatine, in lecto sunt tuo** <sup>19</sup>

she says, using a visual image to highlight the outrage that she has suffered. She goes on to exact from her husband and her father a promise to take vengeance for this sin against her honour and the laws of hospitality by the man who acted as **hostis pro hospite**.<sup>20</sup> The menfolk attempt to console her, saying that the sin is not hers, but her uprightness will not allow her to live with this stain on her honour, and she kills herself, maintaining to the end her strength of character and purpose. Still in the tragic mode, Brutus lifts the bloody dagger aloft and swears on the blood of Lucretia that he will pursue Tarquin and all his family with everything at his command till they no longer rule in Rome. The oath itself, **per sanguinem**,<sup>21</sup> does not have any respectable antecedents,<sup>f</sup> but in dramatic terms it is unrivalled. The reader cannot help but retain the vivid image in his mind of the fallen body of the chaste wife, with Brutus holding the dripping dagger above her as he swears vengeance. The scene inevitably evokes memories of the murder of Caesar, when another Brutus actually wielded the dagger. This dramatic incident shows very powerfully the way in which Livy appeals to his readers' emotions, evoking admiration, fear and pity in turn for Lucretia, using emotive words and phrases such as **pavida ex somno; addit ad metum dedecus; sordido adulterio; si vos viri estis; manantem cruore**;<sup>22</sup> phrases all designed to add to the strong emotions evoked by the episode.

In this dramatic fashion Livy shows how a woman imbued with the old ideas of honour and chastity could prefer death when her honour was violated. The legalistic pleas of the menfolk, insisting that sin consists as much in the intent as in the commission, could not move her. She could not excuse herself from punishment - **ego me etsi peccato absolvo, supplicio non libero** <sup>23</sup> (and here Livy is perhaps harking back to a belief that a woman was so defiled by adultery that any

subsequent offspring would be contaminated) - and so she had to die. This distinction between **peccata dolo malo** and **peccata sine dolo**, sin with and without intention, reflects contemporary law, and not that of the regal period.

For Livy the confrontation between **superbia**, in the person of Tarquin, and **pudicitia**, in the person of Lucretia, shows in dramatic terms how, although **superbia** may at first appear to have won the day, *velut victrix*,<sup>24</sup> in the end it is the superior moral value of **pudicitia** that triumphs. In refusing to live with dishonour, Lucretia's nobility outshines Tarquin's fleeting victory, and his defeat takes on concrete dimensions when, as a consequence of his crime, the populace of Rome rise against him and expel him from the city forever. The reader can only feel that Tarquin's wickedness was justly punished.

A comparison of Dionysius of Halicarnassus' account of the story of Lucretia with Livy's account will show several important differences.<sup>g</sup> Dionysius does not include the contest of wives, and he gives Tarquin a long direct speech in which he tries to persuade Lucretia to submit. In this way he loses the urgency that Livy manages to convey in his account. Dionysius also changes the scene several times, unlike Livy who maintains the unity of place in the manner of a dramatist, to enhance the dramatic effect, which is much greater in Livy's account. Livy's Lucretia does not give way to tears as does Dionysius' character, but maintains the dignity of the ideal Roman matron to the end. In this way Livy holds up the ideal before his readers for their edification.

### Cloelia:

The story of Cloelia is a simple, straightforward one of bravery and initiative in the face of adverse circumstances, and Livy tells it in unadorned fashion, allowing the tale to speak for itself. He has just told the story of Mucius' bravery during the siege

of Rome by Lars Porsenna, and offers Cloelia's story as an example of how bravery can inspire others to similar heights. Cloelia was one of the hostages given by Rome to the Etruscans as part of the agreement with Porsenna which resulted from Mucius' exceptional bravery. Cloelia used her initiative to collect around her some of the other female hostages and, having eluded the guards, she led them in swimming the Tiber under a hail of missiles, and led her followers safely into Rome, where they were all restored to their families. The language that Livy uses here to describe Cloelia is more suited to a general in battle - **dux agminis virginum inter tela hostium**<sup>25</sup> - and this emphasises the masculine nature of her achievement. The contrast between **dux agminis** and **virginum** serves to underline even more strongly the unusual nature of her courage because one would not normally associate a **virgo** with such warlike terms. That was not the end of the episode, however, since her feat prompted Porsenna to demand her return, in terms of the treaty. His initial anger gave way to admiration, and when she returned to his custody, he rewarded her bravery by allowing her to choose a certain number of the remaining hostages for release. Her choice of the young boys, who were most in danger of violation, added a dimension of delicacy to the daring she had already displayed. This episode, in conjunction with the previous one of Mucius, allowed Livy to show that an outstanding example of courage could be recognised and rewarded, not just by the Romans, but by their enemies too, and that such acts provided inspiration for others to emulate. To illustrate the universal nature of such courage Livy says **apud regem Etruscum non tuta solum sed honorata etiam virtus fuit**,<sup>26</sup> making it plain that even an opponent could appreciate the nature of her bravery. In recounting this episode Livy is not only showing how a girl could be inspired to display great courage and initiative by the bravery of another, but he uses it for the edification of his readers, in the hope that in reading of it, they may also be inspired by the simple, uncomplicated story. This form of indirect comment, where the author seems to be impartial, allows him to present the tale in accordance with his aims, without directly expressing his own opinion. The tale of Cloelia is told in

plain, unadorned fashion, which perhaps reflects the straightforward, uncomplicated nature of the girl herself that Livy wanted to convey to his readers. Her story was not suited to rhetorical flourishes and ornamentation, and here he has admirably suited his style to his character.

### Verginia:

One of the most pathetic and romantic episodes involving a woman in the first five Books of Livy's history is that concerning Verginia. In contrast to the story of Cloelia, which was short, simple and unadorned, Livy devotes a great deal of time to the tale of Verginia, not because the girl herself is a more complex character, but because the political implications of the tale are far-reaching and because his aim is to show that the upholding of honour is important to society. Verginia's story is very similar in many ways to the tale of Lucretia, partly in its political connotations and results, and partly in its edifying portrayal of **pudicitia**, and the importance of this virtue to the moral health of society.

The most striking difference between the two episodes, however, is the difference in treatment of the two heroines. Lucretia, the ideal Roman matron, is allowed to speak for herself, in direct rather than reported speech. Perhaps this reflects the respect that Livy felt should be due to the ideal Roman wife, who, through the dedication of herself to the interests of her family, earned the right to be heard. Lucretia is also allowed to act on her own initiative, when she summons her male relatives, but here she is acting entirely within the ideals of Roman womanhood, asking her male relatives to avenge a wrong done to her honour. Verginia, on the other hand, was a young girl still under the authority of her father and this authority was so total and absolute that legally she could not speak for herself. The story of Verginia is so moving and told in so vivid a fashion that the reader does not realise until it is over that Verginia has not said a word, either directly or indirectly, even in

her own defence. Both her father and her fiance are given passionate, emotional speeches, calculated to arouse the sympathy of the crowd and the reader, but throughout the girl stands mute, a pitiful figure, unable to defend herself. This is an excellent example of Livy's ability to use his characters and the background of Roman society to exemplify a virtue or a type, without actually saying so. Verginia and Cloelia are archetypal examples of Roman girlhood, each in her own way showing different aspects of the ideal, without direct comment from the author.

Livy begins the story of Verginia by drawing the reader's attention straight away to the links between it and that of Lucretia -

**non finis solum idem decemviris qui regibus sed causa etiam eadem imperii amittendi esset.**<sup>27</sup>

The cause of the initial crime is the same as that in the story of Lucretia - **libido** - and a man is driven to commit an offence against society through lust. Livy paints a brief but telling portrait of Verginia's family, steeped in the Roman ideals of uprightness in all spheres of life. Against this model family, he sets Appius Claudius who is driven to the worst kind of duplicity to gain his immoral ends. The mere mention of the **gens Claudia** would alert Livy's readers to the presence of evil, since throughout his work this **gens** is subject to hostile comment. At first Appius attempts to win Verginia's favours through bribery with gifts and promises, but when he is unsuccessful because of her propriety, he resorts to more devious, completely amoral means of achieving his ends.

Capitalising on the fact that her father is away on military service, and that she is without a legal protector, he sets in motion a scheme to have her declared the slave of a client of his. Livy does not quite get all the legal ramifications of the procedure correct,<sup>h</sup> but the dramatic impact of Appius' scheme is in no way lessened because of this. Livy describes the scene vividly -

**minister decemviri libidinis manum iniecit, serva sua natam servamque appellans,**

**sequique se iubebat: cunctantem vi abstracturum. Pavida puella stupente, ad clamorem nutricis fidem Quiritum implorantis fit concursus; Vergini patris sponsique Icili populare nomen celebratur.**<sup>28</sup>

The language is clear and simple, and the action easily imagined. The alliteration of *s* in the reported speech of Appius' client adds emphasis to his evil design, while the same effect in **pavida puella stupente** underlines the terror of the girl.

It all depends on the fact that Verginia is without legal protection, and although later on her uncle and her fiance arrive to speak in her defence, legally speaking they are not competent to speak on her behalf. Icilius delivers an impassioned speech, which provides an interesting contrast with the account of the same incident by Dionysius of Halicarnassus.<sup>1</sup> Dionysius' report of Icilius' speech is much less emotive than the one that Livy puts in the mouth of Verginia's fiance, and the emphasis is more on Icilius' personal defence of Verginia. In Livy's account, he appeals to all the deepest Roman beliefs in defence of his betrothed. Since Livy's prime interest was in his characters and their psychological reactions to various situations, this was an ideal opportunity to intensify the emotion of the scene and win over his readers more firmly to the cause of Verginia. Icilius calls up all the symbols of the civil authority that Appius can call upon - the lictors, their rods and axes - and pits himself against them in defence of his betrothed.

**Proinde omnes collegarum quoque lictores convoca; expediri virgas et secures iube; non manebit extra domum patris sponsa Icili.**<sup>29</sup>

The word order of the last sentence is the reverse of what we would normally expect, thus adding extra emphasis to the words **sponsa Icili**, and underlining the fact that as a young girl, Verginia is always seen in terms of the men who are supposed to protect her, either as a daughter of Verginius, or the bride-to-be of Icilius.

Icilius threatens Appius with insurrection by the people and the army if he carries

out his decree, but the speech ends on a note of personal commitment which is in contrast with what precedes it

**Me vindicantem sponsam in libertatem vita citius deseret quam fides.**<sup>30</sup>

Icilius' rhetoric wins a reprieve for Verginia, and Livy deals briefly with the business of summoning Verginia's father to Rome to defend his daughter. Finally he returns to the forum for the last act of the drama. And drama it is, with Verginius and his daughter appearing in mourning and rags to elicit the sympathy of the crowd. The touching image of the father and fiance of the girl going about seeking support, and the women weeping silently, are contrasted with the villain of the piece, Appius, who steps up to the tribunal and declares Verginia to be a slave. At this point Livy allows himself an unusually direct comment, in contrast with other passages where he seems to let the action speak for itself - **quia nusquam ullum in tanta foeditate decreti veri similem invenio.**<sup>31</sup>

A dramatic silence ensues - **silentium inde aliquamdiu tenuit.**<sup>32</sup> The crowd in attendance, and the reader, are stunned, believing that Appius' victory is complete. The silence is, however, a dramatic effect acting as a watershed in the action, because the tables are turned completely after it. Here Livy's ability to structure the episode as a drama is obvious, since the silence is a break between two distinct portions of the action, the first where Appius seems to be in control, and the second where Verginius takes the initiative.

The tableau is broken by the claimant trying to make his way through the crowd to take possession of his supposed slave. This galvanises Verginius into action, and he pours all his anguish into an impassioned denunciation of Appius. Here Livy uses direct speech, and by juxtaposing the names of Icilius and Appius in his first words he neatly encapsulates the confrontation.

**Icilio. inquit. Appi, non tibi despondi et ad nuptias, non ad stuprum educavi.**<sup>33</sup>

The alternatives are neatly balanced in this sentence, bringing out the contrast between what Verginius and Appius intend for Verginia.

Appius begins to fear that things are not going as he had planned and as a result he intimidates the crowd with threats of armed force if the verdict of the court is not carried out. The crowd is quelled by his thundering tones, and here Livy uses a word, **intonuisset**, that he never uses again, and which is found before this on only one other occasion in Latin prose (Cicero, **pro Murena** 81). Instinctively the crowd moves back, leaving

**deserta... praeda iniuriae puella.**<sup>34</sup>

The visual impact is striking. Verginius realises that there is no help to be found and regaining his wits, he addresses Appius in placatory tones. Having gained time, he approaches his daughter, and grabbing a knife from a butcher's shop he stabs her, crying out that there is only one way to free her forever. In words reminiscent of Brutus over the body of Lucretia, he promises Appius

**Te tuumque caput sanguine hoc consecro**<sup>35</sup>

Technically he is not competent to conduct a **consecratio capitis**, since he is not a magistrate or priest, but Livy allows him to do so because of the extreme emotion of the scene. A **consecratio capitis** was the removal of the civil rights of an offender against a law; following an offence the offender would be dedicated to the god against whom he had sinned and by forfeiting his life would then be dealt with by the god.<sup>j</sup> The words **hoc sanguine** recall the episode of Lucretia where the oath is made **per sanguinem**. The crowd is finally moved to riot and the breakup of the scene where the interest was centred on particular characters is reflected in the shorter sentences used to describe the disorder following Verginia's death.

**Sequentes clamitant matronae, eamne liberorum procreandorum condicionem, ea pudicitiae praemia esse?**<sup>36</sup>

Here again it is instructive to read Dionysius' account of the same episode,<sup>k</sup> where the trial is reported at great length and without the dramatic intensity of Livy's

version. Rather than elaborating on the tale, Livy has compressed his account with a view to heightening the dramatic tension. He focuses mainly on two scenes, the first one before Appius' tribunal, and the second one the next day in the Forum. Any other necessary action is dealt with in such a way as not to detract from the impact of these two main scenes of the action. Where Dionysius recounts the speeches at the trial, Livy does not interrupt the sweep of the action but concentrates on the outcome. Here again his flair for dramatisation is evident.

It can be seen that there are distinct similarities between the stories of Lucretia and Verginia, mainly in the fact that they both die as a result of attempts, both successful and unsuccessful, on their honour. There are, however, differences as well, partly owing to the difference in their status. Lucretia is older and a married woman, and as such she is a more definite character, and is able to act on her own behalf. Indeed, she displays great strength of character in defence of her virtue, and she and Cloelia can be contrasted as resolute in defence of good with Tanaquil and Tullia who exercise their resolve for selfish ends. Verginia epitomises the young Roman girl, totally under the authority of her father, and even when faced with a terrible fate, she has to rely on her menfolk to protect her. Needless to say, the power of a **paterfamilias** to put his child to death is not questioned, since it was an accepted part of his authority.

As in the case of Lucretia, whose death led to the expulsion of the Tarquins from Rome, Verginia's death aroused passions in the people that led eventually to the overthrow of the **decemviri**, and by linking the virtue of **pudicitia** to political events, Livy is able to show how it is necessary for the moral well-being of the state. A state where this virtue is not respected and upheld is open to other forms of abuse as well. By personifying the virtue in the characters of Lucretia and Verginia and recounting their fates in vivid, dramatic terms, he is able to convey his message far more effectively than by labouring the point in more specific terms.

### Veturia

Veturia represents a different aspect of Roman womanhood from the ones we have studied previously. For a start, she is an older woman, the archetype of the Roman matrona, and as such is worthy of respect. Unlike Verginia or Lucretia, who depend ultimately on their menfolk for their defence, Veturia acts in her own right, although the idea for the embassy of women to Coriolanus did not come originally from her. Her most striking characteristic is her unflinching patriotism, which causes her to oppose her son, and to suppress her maternal instincts in the face of the demands of her love for Rome. This type of courage and resolution belong to the ideal of Roman womanhood.

Having been exiled from Rome and taken refuge with the Volsci, Coriolanus is in command of the Volscian army and on the point of taking Rome. Since the people of Rome and the Senatorial party are at odds over whether to fight or not, envoys are sent to the Volscian camp to sue for peace. Coriolanus, remembering previous ill treatment at the hands of his fellow countrymen, insists that all lost territory should be restored to the Volsci before peace terms could be negotiated. At this stalemate, the women of Rome come into their own. They persuade Veturia and her daughter-in-law to go to Coriolanus' camp with his children to plead the Romans' cause. In the first few sentences of this episode Livy reveals the dramatic confrontation between men and women that it epitomises -

**quoniam armis viri defendere urbem non possent, mulieres precibus lacrimisque defenderent.**<sup>37</sup>

There is deliberate contrast here between **armis** and **precibus lacrimisque**, because Livy is about to tell a story in which prayers and tears are stronger than force of arms. Coriolanus is depicted as a strong, resolute commander, his resolve immutable in the face of pleas by both ambassadors and priests and impatient at the news that a crowd of women had arrived in his camp; contrasted with this is the

mournful band of weeping women, ostensibly weak and powerless.

Everything changes when mother and son confront each other; Coriolanus softens when he recognises his mother, but she in her turn becomes angry as she contemplates the son who has forsaken his native land. Coriolanus goes to embrace his mother, but she forestalls him,

**Coriolanus prope ut amens consternatus ab sede sua cum ferret matri obviam complexum, mulier in iram ex precibus versa**<sup>38</sup>

Livy uses direct speech here for Veturia's words to her son and he employs several poetic or archaic words in order to underline the tragic tone of the confrontation of mother and son. The idiom of *sine* with the subjunctive is an obsolete one from the time of Plautus and Terence, which was revived by Augustan writers, and which Livy uses on only three occasions, and it therefore adds to the archaic flavour of the speech. The use of *senecta* for *senectus* is also a poetical usage, as is *ira cecidit* later on, and they heighten the emotional effect of Veturia's questions to her son. Her whole speech is very reminiscent of Greek tragedy. The idea that ravaging one's native land goes against the grain of every civilised society is found in Greek tragedy, but it would have struck a very responsive chord with the Romans, for whom it would have been an outrage against their concept of *pietas*.

**Potuisti populari hanc terram quae te genuit atque aluit?**<sup>39</sup> is an emotionally charged question, placing Coriolanus beyond the pale of society if he could find it in himself to go against all his background to commit this deed. She piles question upon question, until finally she voices her despair **ergo ego nisi peperissem, Roma non oppugnaretur; nisi filium haberem, libera in libera patria mortua essem.**<sup>40</sup>

The repetition of *nisi* here accentuates the intensity of Veturia's emotion. For a mother, the thought that it would have been better if her child had never been born is a devastating one, and for Veturia, life could hold nothing worse than to have her son responsible for threatening his native land. **Libera in libera patria mortua**

**essem** expresses the wish of every Roman citizen, but more particularly of a mother whose son is threatening that very **patria**, and the repetition of **libera** brings to mind the importance of **libertas** and its defence to the Roman character.

Veturia's patriotism takes precedence over her maternal feelings. Coriolanus could not prevail against his mother or the weeping of the group of women and the emphatic position of **virum**, a word usually carrying connotations of manly strength, at the end of the sentence illustrates his final defeat - **fregere tandem virum**.<sup>41</sup>

Coriolanus has no defence against his mother, only an embrace, and having sent his family home,

**ipse retro ab urbe castra movit**.<sup>42</sup>

The contrast of this last sentence, simple and unadorned, with the tragic, highly charged speech of Veturia is total, and all the more effective for its lack of embellishment. Livy does not attempt to describe Coriolanus' emotions; he allows his actions to say everything. He does, however, allow himself a brief reflection on the fact that in those days, the Romans did not envy the glory of others, and that the temple of Fortuna Muliebris was erected and dedicated to commemorate the event.

### Horatia.

The story of Horatia is contained in a larger story about the victory of her brothers in a battle of the champions with the three Curiatii. Two of her brothers die in the battle but the one surviving overcomes the three Curiatii, and returns to Rome, bearing the spoils before him. At the height of his victory, and while he is surrounded by public acclaim and adulation, his sister recognises the cloak he is carrying as part of the spoils is one that she had made for her fiance, one of the Curiatii. In one line Livy captures her grief -

**solvit crines et flebiliter nomine sponsum mortuum appellat**.<sup>43</sup>

In such circumstances, one would not expect a young girl to consider the

implications of expressing her grief in such a situation - she could only weep for her loss. Her brother, incensed by the fact that she is mourning an enemy, when he had just risked his life for his native land, stabs her to death. There is a good example of how Livy achieves the clarity of action that Cicero demanded in the recounting of history in the sentence

**Stricto itaque gladio simul verbis increpans transfigit puellam.**<sup>44</sup>

With great economy of expression, he allows his readers to see how the incident occurred, with almost cinematic vividness. The position of **puellam** at the end of the sentence gives the word special emphasis, bringing out the contrast between it and the harshness of the ideas contained in such words as **gladio**, **increpans** and **transfigit**. Livy illustrates the barbarity of Horatius' deed in his brutal words as he kills her -

**sic eat quaecumque Romana lugebit hostem.**<sup>45</sup>

His total lack of human understanding, notwithstanding his undeniable courage on the battle field, is juxtaposed against the all too human grief of his sister for whom love takes precedence over matters of state. Although she was considered a criminal for mourning an enemy of the state, Livy allows his readers to sympathise with her by painting her brother in an unsympathetic light. The episode continues with the solution of the dilemma of simultaneously recognising the debt of the state to him for his bravery, and demanding some sort of payment from him for pre-empting the processes of the law by killing his sister. Horatia is used here to point up the contrast between her brother's harshness in regarding her as an enemy of the state, and her more normal, human grief at the loss of a loved one. Although Livy does not say so explicitly, it is obvious from the way in which he describes the event that he feels that even patriotism can be excessive.

### Conclusions.

In studying the characters of these six women in the first five books of his history, it

becomes apparent that Livy uses them to illustrate various facets of his concept of the ideal Roman woman. Lucretia perhaps is the most obvious example of this ideal - she is pure, chaste, conscientious in the carrying out of her duties, and most of all, resolute in defence of her honour. Cloelia and Verginia epitomise different aspects of Roman girlhood, one fearless and full of initiative in the face of danger, and the other totally obedient to those who have authority over her. Veturia illustrates yet another facet of the ideal - a mother who puts the interests of Rome before her love for her son, and who cannot allow her son to commit what she believes to be a crime against his native land.

By way of contrast, the reverse of the ideal is also used to illustrate a moral lesson. Tanaquil and Tullia are no less determined characters than Lucretia or Veturia, but they are driven by a selfish desire for personal gain, and given the Roman admiration for the subjugation of the self to a higher ideal such as *pietas*, they are not depicted as models worthy of imitation. Tullia's descent into insanity is seen as a fitting end for someone who has committed murder several times in pursuit of personal ambition.

It must be said that the ideal of Roman womanhood that emerges from a study of some of the female characters of Books 1-5 is undoubtedly that of a patriarchal society. It could not be otherwise, since Livy is telling the story of such a society. His ideal of womanhood is pure, chaste, obedient, but capable of great courage and moral strength in adverse circumstances. Livy is attempting to show how the history of Rome has been influenced by the moral qualities of her best citizens, and how a sound morality has contributed to the greatness of Rome. Even morally reprehensible characters can be used to illustrate this point, and by recounting the consequences of immoral acts, he can, without direct comment, show that society needs to be based on sound principles if it is to function properly. He has used exceptional women to show that, even in a society where women are completely

under the authority of their menfolk, moral rectitude on their part can play an important role in shaping the destiny of a great nation, in some cases directly, such as Veturia, and in others as an example to future generations, as in the case of Lucretia.

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|-----|------------|-----|----------|
| 1.  | Preface 10 | 24. | 1 58 5   |
| 2.  | Preface 6  | 25. | 2 13 6   |
| 3.  | 2 40 10    | 26. | 2 13 9   |
| 4.  | 1 34 6     | 27. | 3 44 1   |
| 5.  | 1 34 8     | 28. | 3 44 6-7 |
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| 15. | 1 48 7     | 38. | 2 40 5   |
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| 20. | 1 58 8     | 43. | 1 26 2   |
| 21. | 1 59 1     | 44. | 1 26 3   |
| 22. | 1 58 - 59  | 45. | 1 26 5   |
| 23. | 1 58 10    |     |          |

FOOTNOTES.

- a. Luce (1977:231)
- b. McDonald (1957: JRS 155-172)
- c. Cicero **de inv** 1 21 29
- d. McDonald (1957: JRS 155-172)
- e. Ogilvie (1965:144)
- f. Ogilvie (1965:226)
- g. Dionysius of Halicarnassus 4 64 et seq.
- h. Ogilvie (1965:481)
- i. Dionysius of Halicarnassus 9 28 et seq.
- j. Cicero **Pro Balbo** 14 33
- k. Dionysius of Halicarnassus 11 29

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