

## Women as Murderers in Tacitus' *Annales*

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Narratives of murder seem to dominate today's media in all forms, with those perpetrated by women comprising a considerable – and growing – subset. Consider the continued obsession over the 1968 murder of Sharon Tate by the so-called “Manson Girls” – these stories often occupy a space somewhere between fetishization and morality tale.<sup>1</sup>

While this obsession might appear relatively modern, a quick look at the staples of any ancient tragedy course finds similar tales. For example, Medea and Clytemnestra were both said to have murdered their families for power. Indeed, for centuries high-ranking women have been accused of gaining political or social capital for themselves or their family through the perpetration of murders. We can also find this phenomenon in Tacitus' *Annales*, in which nine women within imperial circles are attributed sixteen unnatural deaths. Tacitus gives all but one of these deaths political motivation. These imperial women are not the only ones accused in Tacitus, either – Elizabeth Ann Pollard counted thirty-nine total trials against women (of any social class) in Tacitus' account of the first century CE.<sup>2</sup> While Tacitus' dislike of women is a well-trodden scholarly path, the correlation of these accusations with the rise and fall of specific women's power – especially that of Agrippina Minor – is not.<sup>3</sup>

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1 See *Savage Appetites: Four True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession* (Monroe, 2019) for an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon.

2 Kimberly B. Stratton and Dayna S. Kallers, *Daughters of Hecate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 183.

<sup>3</sup> Tacitus' dislike for women is discussed by Francesa Santoro L'Hoir in “Tacitus and Women's Usurpation of Power,” *CW* Vol 88 no. 1; Ronald

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Indeed, broader culture tends to take Tacitus' accusations against her plainly as fact,<sup>4</sup> with her name frequently listed in pop-history articles meant to capitalize upon the new cultural obsession with serial killers. Indeed, the idea of Agrippina as a murderer has so pervaded literature that often it is treated as undisputed fact in anything from paperback criminology books to highly technical scientific writing.<sup>5</sup>

It is of no importance whether or not the women of the Julio-Claudians were truly behind all the slayings of which they are accused. Moreover, tempting as it may be to play detective, to try and assign motive and method to the nineteen-plus murder allegations within Tacitus' writing, the attempt is impossible, sitting as we are some two thousand years after the fact with only a handful somewhat reliable accounts from which to work.

Instead, it is more fruitful to read and interpret these allegations as extended rhetorical and historiographic devices. This paper will explore how Tacitus utilizes these murder allegations – which he describes using repeated phraseology and construction to connect the perpetrators together across time – as a method used to discredit the political activity of imperial women.

The bulk of this piece focuses upon the writing of Tacitus for a number of reasons, chiefly being that out of the three

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Syme in "Princesses and Others in Tacitus," *Greece and Rome* Vol 28 no. 1; and Jennifer Antiqua in "A Rhetorical Use of Women in Tacitus' *Annales*," *Studia Antiqua* Vol 3 no. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Margaret F. Roberts and Michael Wink, *Alkaloids: Biochemistry, Ecology, and Medicinal Applications* (Plenum Press, 1999), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Vronsky, *Female Serial Killers* (Berkeley Books, 2007), 8. See also, Roberts and Wink, *Alkaloids*, 15.

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major historians of the Roman Principate – Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and Suetonius – Tacitus’ narratives devote significantly more space to narratives of women, especially those women who he deems to be trespassing their acceptable moral bounds.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, although all three historians were writing from a place of hindsight, Tacitus’ writings appear to be closest in chronological proximity to the Julio-Claudians, dating to around 116 CE.<sup>7</sup> This historic nearness minimizes the possibility that the writings, especially the accusations of murder with which I am concerned, were influenced by the writings of another annalist. Although, as previously stated, we are not concerned with vetting the accuracy of said accusations, it helps to assume that they are coming from either a basis of record or the *rumores* with which Tacitus is perpetually concerned instead of simply from the writing of another.

The third and final reason this study focuses upon Tacitus comes down to a matter of his access to sealed records. Although one certainly cannot fully trust Tacitus, it is important to remember he is a historian in the ancient sense,<sup>8</sup> and as such his narratives are subjective and impacted by his personal opinions. His position as a senator would likely have allowed him access to older senatorial and court records, which might impact his ability to speak about more obscure events.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Tacitus states that he had access to the now-lost memoirs of

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<sup>6</sup>Annelise Freisenbruch, *Caesar’s Wives* (New York: Atria Books, 2011), 26.

<sup>7</sup>Judith Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12.

<sup>8</sup>Andrew Feldherr, “The Poisoned Chalice: Rumor and Historiography in Tacitus’ Account of the Death of Drusus,” *MD* 61 (2008): 181.

<sup>9</sup>Alexander Hugh McDonald, “Tacitus,” *Britannica*, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tacitus-Roman-historian>.

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Agrippina Minor, which adds an additional element of credibility.<sup>10</sup> Backing up this claim is the presence of more emotional elements, which would not have found a place in the traditional annals format.<sup>11</sup> In short, this unique combination of motives and access, which led Tacitus to write the way he did, provides a unique opportunity to study the societal reception of politically charged women, especially given the lack of solid evidence for such a character in the ancient world.

Within the surviving books of Tacitus' *Annales*, nine women who either were members of or within the service of the imperial family are alleged to have committed – sometimes alone, sometimes in groups – at least sixteen murders. When one includes Poppaea Sabina, Nero's second wife who Tacitus heavily implies led Nero to order the executions of his own first wife, Claudia Octavia, and mother, that number increases to ten and eighteen.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, with one notable exception, all of these murders are explicitly mentioned as being committed for the purpose of increasing the alleged perpetrator's political or social capital. It should be noted that the high-ranking women upon whom Tacitus places the onus of crime rarely wield the sword or administer the poison themselves – instead, they rely on a number of courtiers, for the most part women or eunuchs, when the courtier's identity is specified.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 4.53.

<sup>11</sup> Wendy Heller, "Tacitus Incognito: Opera as History in 'L' Inconorazione Di Poppea'," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52, no. 1 (1999): 52.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix II for a full list of these allegations, text references, and alleged motives.

<sup>13</sup> See: Lygdus and Eudemus in the murder of Drusus, Tacitus, *Annales* 4.3-4; 2.74; 12.65.

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While making these accusations, Tacitus employs a number of rhetorical devices both to implicitly connect the accusations together and create an image of the woman in question's morality and desires in the mind of the reader. He accomplishes this feat through repetition of phrases throughout accounts, as well as with emotionally charged language and application of his well-studied weighted alternative writing style.

Tacitus operates beneath a thin veneer of historicity through his use of the annalistic format, used "to give the illusion of conventionality, while manipulating it so as to provide a vehicle for his idiosyncratic reconstruction."<sup>14</sup> He maintains his seeming impartiality by attributing any accusations of wrongdoing to *rumores*, to whisperings of the plebs, while covertly expressing his own opinions as to the actions or motivations at hand.<sup>15</sup> In addition, when Tacitus presents multiple options as to the way an event transpired, one should take the final suggestion as the one which he truly believes. This technique is called the "weighted alternative" and is often marked by the signaling words "*sive...sive*."<sup>16</sup> In light of this, recognize that *rumores* often follow more impartial historic fact, placing the rumors as the weighted alternatives.<sup>17</sup> In his accusations of murder, Tacitus uses these rhetorical devices as a means of "othering" and discrediting imperial women, as well as drawing parallels between the women who he accuses. While he claims impartiality, viewing all of these methods combined is significant evidence that he was anything but.

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<sup>14</sup> Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Israel Shatzman, "Tacitean Rumours," *Latomus* 33, no. 3 (1974): 556.

<sup>16</sup> Donald Sullivan, "Innuendo and the 'Weighted Alternative' in Tacitus," *CJ* 71, no. 4 (1976): 313.

<sup>17</sup> Feldherr, "The Poisoned Chalice," 181.

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Repetition of words is common in ancient Roman political writings, with Cicero saying in the *De Oratore* that “the reiteration of words has sometimes a peculiar force, and sometimes an elegance.”<sup>18</sup> Tacitus employs this technique though the repetition of emotionally charged words and phrases in order to make the reader unconsciously develop preconceived notions of his accused women. His accusation can begin before the women’s narrative even reaches any specific crime and build up over time throughout the continuing narrative. One of the earliest encounters of this type of language is the use of *novercae* (“stepmother”) in reference to Livia, later repeated to refer to Agrippina. Further, it is only used in chapters that prominently feature these two women. Although both women’s importance as a mother – both had sons who would grow up to be emperor – supersede their role as a stepmother, they are consistently referred to in ways that make them appear an interloper. Tacitus might use this term to emphasize the insinuation that they engineered the deaths of the more legitimate heirs to the throne. The first mention of the term is in relation to the deaths of Gaius and Lucius Caesar: “...*vel novercae Liviae dolus...*”<sup>19</sup> Notice the first word of this phrase: *vel* is another word meaning “or,” placing “the intrigues of a stepmother” as the favored version of what happened to the two boys. The word is again repeated three chapters later, “*hanc novercalibus odiis*” (the hatred of this stepmother), in reference to the death of Agrippa Postumus.<sup>20</sup> *Novercae* is used twice more to refer to Livia – in 1.10.24 and 1.33.11 – and is not

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<sup>18</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.206.

<sup>19</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 1.3.1: “or the intrigues of their stepmother Livia.”

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6.12.

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encountered again until Book 12, when Agrippina marries Claudius. While trying to dissuade his emperor from marrying Agrippina, Claudius' freedman Narcissus says that she would regard his children, Britannicus and Octavia, with nothing other than "*novercalibus odiis*" (stepmotherly hatred), the exact phrase used in referencing Livia's feelings towards Agrippa Postumus.<sup>21</sup> Of note here is that by the first chapter of Book 13, all persons in this anecdote would be dead; Claudius and Narcissus ostensibly murdered at the hand of Agrippina, Octavia and Britannicus by Nero.

*Novercae* will reappear four more times within Book 12, once when Britannicus begins to catch on to her "perintempestiva *novercae*" (the importunities of the stepmother),<sup>22</sup> once when she replaces his (murdered) tutors with those of her own choosing,<sup>23</sup> and finally when she is plotting the death of Claudius through "*novercae insidiis*" (the intrigues of a stepmother).<sup>24</sup> The fourth place where it appears in Book 12 is during a seemingly unrelated story regarding the Parthian Wars and the overthrowing of an Iberian king, Radamistus. Tacitus attributes the reasoning for his starting a revolution as an inability to return home to face "*novercae odiis*."<sup>25</sup> He places the story of Radamistus' revolt directly between Agrippina placing her son first in line to the throne and the murder of her husband – too convenient to not be intentional.

While Tacitus relies heavily upon the 'Evil Stepmother' trope in order to other Agrippina and Livia, that is far from the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 12.2.1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 12.26.1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 12.41.1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 12.65.1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 12.44.1.

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only word he uses for such a purpose. Within the context of his murder allegations, he consistently chooses words that connote trickery and deviousness to describe the acts taking place. Rutland describes this well, saying, "Tacitean women pull no punches, using every stratagem available to them ... in order to gain control of the situation and of the man who ostensibly controls the situation."<sup>26</sup> These women bind men into their plots, and Tacitus reflects this in his frequent use of the verb *devincio* (to bind or subjugate). Of the ten times a form of *devincio* is used, seven are in direct reference to the murders perpetrated by women, which I detailed above. Livia "*senem Augustum devinxerat*" (bound the aged Augustus), allowing her to order the deaths of Gaius and Lucius Caesar.<sup>27</sup> The word is again used about Plancina prior to the death of Germanicus.<sup>28</sup> We encounter the word again in Book eleven, as Claudius was excessively "*uxori devinctum*," (bondage to his wife) that may interfere with Messalina's condemnation.<sup>29</sup> The word appears twice in reference to Agrippina's murders – once regarding the death of Claudius<sup>30</sup> and once in reference to that of Lepida.<sup>31</sup> It is again used twice in the same section of Book thirteen: once in reference to Poppaea Sabina's hold over Otho, and again referencing that of Acte over Nero.<sup>32</sup>

The use of *devincio* is likely intentional – Santoro-L'Hoir indicates that binding and loosening verbs when used in such a

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<sup>26</sup> Linda W. Rutland, "Women as Makers of Kings in Tacitus' Annals," *CW* 72, no. 1 (1978): 17.

<sup>27</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 1.3.1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.58.1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.28.9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.42.4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.42.1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.46.1.

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context are tied to acts of transgression, especially in relation to women's role in the home.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the act of "binding" itself would have been evocative of witchcraft to Tacitus' contemporaries, as a large portion of curses and spells – as evidenced by surviving curse tablets – involved similar binding actions among its invocations.<sup>34</sup> This tracks with the commonly held cultural values upon which Tacitus relies, again pointed out by Santoro-L'Hoir: that poison was a woman's crime, that it was associated with a lack of chastity, and that it was tied to magic and superstitious thought.<sup>35</sup> This notion is most obvious in the murder of Germanicus, as "spells and curses, lead tablets ... and other wicked implements" were found in the home of Plancia and Piso.<sup>36</sup> Also, in the case of Apronia, Numantina was said to have plied her ex-husband using "spells and potions" into murdering his new wife, but it lurks just beneath the surface in many other accusations.<sup>37</sup>

The concept that committing a poisoning hinged upon a woman losing her chastity also deserves examination. Tacitus appears from his writing to be concerned with the chastity (*pudicitia*) of the women whom he accuses, such as this use regarding Livilla – "a woman, having let go of her chastity, would not refuse letting go of other virtues."<sup>38</sup> *Pudicitia* – or rather, the lack thereof – is weaponized by Tacitus as a way to pass

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<sup>33</sup> Santoro L'Hoir, *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 74.

<sup>34</sup> Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999): 26.

<sup>35</sup> L'Hoir, *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales*, 150.

<sup>36</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 2.55.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.22.

<sup>38</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 4.3.1.

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judgement. Agrippina and Messalina are both said to have the opposite of chastity (*impudicitia*) within the same sentence, shortly before Claudius' murder. Tacitus aligns a lack of chastity with an unfeminine ambition, with specifically Agrippina referred to as "*quamquam ne impudicitiam quidem nunc abesse Pallante adultero, ne quis ambigat decus pudorem corpus, cuncta regno viliora habere.*"<sup>39</sup>

Seemingly routine words, like *mulier*, meaning "woman," or sometimes "concubine," are also used by Tacitus to put forth an image of women in power. Specifically, he uses *mulier* as an adjective, and places it in a position that attributes women's violent urges to their gender. *Mulier* in either a noun or adjectival form occurs forty-four times within the surviving text of *Annales*, and seventeen of these mentions are negative. While two of these are the word on its own, fifteen are either paired with a negative word or in a derivative form which makes the term less serious (i.e., *muliercula*, meaning "little" or "inconsequential woman"). He says that Livia and Agrippina possess *muliebris impotentiam*<sup>40</sup> (feminine rage) and the latter is said to have killed Lepida because of *muliebris causis* (womanly reasons).<sup>41</sup> L'Hoir points out that this use is tactical, that Tacitus "employs *muliebris impotentia* in a similar vein: the phrase not only highlights female abuse of power in the *Annales*; it also links Livia to Agrippina Minor thematically and brings the concatenation of events spelling doom for the domus Caesarum

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 12.65.2: "immodesty was not to be absent when [Agrippina] had committed adultery with Pallas, she did not hesitate [to show] she held her honor, her shame, and her body all cheaper than the throne."

<sup>40</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 1.4.1; 12.57.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 12.64.1.

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full circle."<sup>42</sup> He claims Plancina used *muliebri fraude* (womanly deceit) in her plot against Germanicus,<sup>43</sup> as did Messalina against Valerius Asiaticus.<sup>44</sup> Other words paired with *mulier* include *offensiones* ("offenses," describing the action of Livia in 1.33), *aemulatione* ("competition," about Plancina in 2.43), *ingenio* ("temperament," regarding Agrippina in 12.66) *insidias* ("plots," in 13.13) *superbia* ("haughtiness," in 13.14) and *inlecebras* ("lures," in 14.2).

Phrase repetition occupies a slightly different rhetorical space than the repetition of single words as detailed above. Whereas single words need to be repeated many times to develop a desired effect, entire phrases need repeating only two or three times in order to call one back to prior uses. There are two main phrases which Tacitus deploys multiple times, the first (*semper atrox* or *semper odio*) being much more invective than the second (*primo novo principatu mors*), a relatively benign phrase. Both are used to draw parallels between, respectively, the loss and gain of power by women in similar situations.

*Semper odio* and *semper atrox*, meaning "always hateful" or "always cruel/ferocious" occurs a total of three times within the text, and each time is used to describe the actions of a politically motivated woman, all three of whom just happen to be tied to Nero. The first mention, in Book four, is a descriptor of a woman we have not yet mentioned: Agrippina Major. While she is not accused of any murders, perhaps because she exerted her influence mainly in the domestic sphere,<sup>45</sup> just like her

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<sup>42</sup> L'Hoir, "Tacitus and Women's Usurpation of Power," 18.

<sup>43</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 2.71.1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.3.

<sup>45</sup> Barrett, *Agrippina*, 22.

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daughter, she was strong willed in working for her children's success. Tacitus describes her as "*semper atrox, tum et periculo propinquae accensa*" (always ferocious, now incited into fury) following the implication of her cousin, Claudia Pulchra, in Sejanus' treason trials.<sup>46</sup> The next time we encounter the phrase all the way in Book thirteen – albeit slightly reworded – when Nero's friends tell him to be wary of his mother and "*insidias mulieres semper atrocis, tum et falsae*" (the trickery of a woman, always ferocious but now false).<sup>47</sup> Notice how evocative this phrase is, as well as the use as the more charged term for woman, *mulier*. The fact that such similar phrasing – the first five words in each are the same – appears to be deliberate. At the time of the second mention, Agrippina is beginning to slip from her position of power, as Nero becomes involved in his affair with Poppaea Sabina, just as Agrippina's mother began to lose her political clout as Sejanus' trial implicated her confidante. The third mention, too, involves a loss of power, albeit temporary: Poppaea Sabina was "*quae semper odio, tum et metu atrox*" as the public revolted against her, following her marriage to Nero and the exile of her predecessor Octavia.<sup>48</sup> Tacitus may have been trying to tie Poppaea Sabina to Agrippina Major as well; Sabina's gain in power is directly correlated to Agrippina's downfall. And, while Tacitus does not attribute any murders directly to her, she is often pointed at as a major driving force behind Nero's decisions to murder Octavia and his mother.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 4.52.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.13.1.

<sup>48</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 14.61.1: "always hateful, now enraged out of fear."

<sup>49</sup> Paul Murgatroyd, "Tacitus on the Death of Octavia," *Greece and Rome* 55, no. 2 (2008): 264.

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The next repeated phrase is meant to mark a transition in the empire. Some variation of *primo novo principatu mors* (the first death under the new principate) appears as the first phrase in 1.6.1 and 13.1.1, at the beginning of Tiberius and Nero's reigns respectively, in regard to the deaths of Agrippa Postumus and Junius Silanus. This phrase serves to tie the two emperors together, especially regarding their mothers, Livia and Agrippina. These women are often pointed at as the epitome of corrupt empresses; out of all the women in this study, they bear the brunt of Tacitus' ire. Indeed, he accuses them of the majority of the crimes, and occupy the same narrative space as ambitious, but cold, maternal figures.<sup>50</sup> Both exerted an extreme power over their ruling son, both of whom are criticized by Tacitus for being overindulgent – Nero having "*per licita atque inlicita foedantus*," (defiled himself through legal and illegal means)<sup>51</sup> while Tiberius is described simply as "*intestabilis saevitia sed obtectis libidinibus*" (infamous for his cruelty, though he kept quiet his indulgences).<sup>52</sup> With this context in mind, as it would have been for Roman readers, the phrase conjures up not just a change in leadership, but a transition into a new, perverse era of the empire, doomed with a woman at the helm.

Repetition of specific words and phraseology serve the purpose of tying together the narratives across time – although he claims to write in a way that is "*sine ira et studio*"<sup>53</sup> – his writing style points at the complete opposite. Tacitus uses these

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<sup>50</sup> Freisenbruch, *Caesar's Wives*, 210.

<sup>51</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 15.37.1.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.51.1.

<sup>53</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 1.1.1: "without anger or any specific inclination."

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rhetorical devices as “the resources employed by Tacitus the artist to produce an impression for which Tacitus the historian is not willing to take the responsibility.”<sup>54</sup>

The question still remains as to what all these accusations and rhetorical devices mean within the context of Roman historiography. What falsehoods lie within Tacitus’ writings about women? Do these accusations even really matter? There is no doubt that Tacitus’ writing of women is flawed – for example, his tendency to write women in diametrically opposed pairings.<sup>55</sup> For every Octavia, every loyal, obedient wife, there has to be a Livia – a woman who shows just how bad women can be if they take on masculine attributes such as being *ferox*, or *atrox* like Agrippina.<sup>56</sup>

As for if Tacitus’ rather one-sided writings of women really matter in the long run, the answer is a resounding yes. L’Hoir points out that “the majority of Tacitean women continue to be viewed as individuals unduly and inappropriately obsessed with power,”<sup>57</sup> and one can see this reflected as early as the first century CE drama *Octavia* (attributed to Seneca), in which Agrippina emerges from the underworld.<sup>58</sup> The narratives of Tacitus also proved to be popular source material for Renaissance opera – Handel’s *Agrippina* and Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppaea* both borrow heavily from Tacitus.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Inez Scott Ryberg, “Tacitus’ Art of Innuendo,” *TAPA* 73 (1942): 384

<sup>55</sup> Freisenbruch, *Caesar’s Wives*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 7.

<sup>57</sup> L’Hoir, “Tacitus and Women’s Usurpation of Power,” 5.

<sup>58</sup> [Seneca], *Octavia* 595.

<sup>59</sup> Garcia-Ventura, Agnès, and Marta Ortega Balanza, “The Construction of Femininity in Händel’s *Agrippina*: From History to Dramatic Opera,” In *Great Women on Stage: The Reception of Women Monarchs from Antiquity in Baroque Opera*, edited by Kerstin Droß-Krüpe (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz), 40.

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One does not have to venture back to the eighteenth century to see this power-hungry Tacitean matron in media, however. Relatively modern pieces – think *I, Claudius*, HBO's *Rome*, or any number of pulp fiction novels about Messalina – somehow build upon Tacitus' characterization to create even more exaggerated characters. That is not to say that these women, within the original work, are not fictional themselves – Livia, Agrippina, and the rest are in essence caricatures, "largely a literary construct that serves the larger ends of the narrative of the principates."<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, Tacitus' work is one of the earliest examples of what Francesca Santoro L'Hoir calls the "unchaste poisoner," a historiographic stock character of a woman who uses her connections, her body, and her potion chest in order to gain political capital for herself and her family.<sup>61</sup> While we cannot be sure that Tacitus' work created this trope, one cannot help but draw comparisons between his historical narratives and those of later vilified women such as Lucrezia Borgia,<sup>62</sup> Catherine de Medici,<sup>63</sup> and Madame de Montespan,<sup>64</sup> all of whom have similar enduring legacies as Tacitean women: poisoners, temptresses, with their eyes on nothing but the throne.

While these women may be portrayed as corrupt, as evil, as willing to murder, we cannot deny that Tacitus' women

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<sup>60</sup> Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*.

<sup>61</sup> L'Hoir, *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and Historiography in Tacitus' Annales*, 152.

<sup>62</sup> Ciolkowski, Laura, "The Woman (In) Question: Gender, Politics, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton's "Lucretia"," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 26, no. 1 (1992): 86.

<sup>63</sup> Sutherland, N. M, "Catherine De Medici: The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 9, no. 2 (1978): 47.

<sup>64</sup> Somerset, Anne, *The Affair of the Poisons: Murder, Infanticide, and Satanism at the Court of Louis XIV* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004): 17.

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are powerful. In this portrayal is one of the most confounding paradoxes within Tacitus – he uses every rhetorical tool within his repertoire in an attempt to discredit and disempower imperial women, to deny them as having any legitimate agency within the political sphere. However, in accusing them of so many crimes, Tacitus gives them so much more agency and power than they likely ever could have had, given the social restraints placed upon women of their class.<sup>65</sup> Whether or not these women committed the scores of crimes of which they are accused is of no matter in the end. What does matter is that Tacitus' accusations continue to be taken as pure fact. What's more, they exhibit that the de-facto cultural trope of women only gaining power through illicit means is nothing new, and if recent media is anything to go by it will not go away any time soon. While the long-term historiographic implications of Tacitus' depiction of women like Messalina, or Agrippina, or Livia is no doubt vast, they can be useful examples of how historic women have just as complex motivations and actions as historic men, and reminders to consider and judge them accordingly.

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<sup>65</sup> Stratton and Kallers, *Daughters of Hecate*, 52.

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## Appendix

**TABLE OF ALLEGATIONS IN TACITUS AND CORROBORATING ACCOUNTS**

Perpetrator	Victim	Tacitus Ref.	Comments	Categorization	Corroborating Accounts
Livia	Gaius Caesar	1.3	Presented as a weighted alternate	I	Cass. Dio 55.10.4
	Lucius Caesar			I	
	Agrippa Postumus	1.6	"The first crime of the new principate"	I	Cass. Dio 57.3.1, Suet. Tib. 22.1
	Plancia	Germanicus	2.82	Indirect Accusation based on friendship with Plancia	II
2.55, 2.57, 2.71, 3.13-15, 6.24			In cooperation with her husband, Gn. Piso. Strong textual association with witchcraft		
2.74			Described as "Infamous for her poisonings"	(Only appears in Tacitus)	
Livilla	Drusus	4.2-9	Implicated in Sejanus' murder of her husband	II	Cass. Dio. 58.11.7, Suet. Tib. 62
Numantina	Apronia	4.22	Said to have incited her ex-husband into killing his current wife through spells and incantations	II	None

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Urgulania	P. Silanus	4.22	Sent her grandson a dagger in the mail to incite him to suicide, said to have been due to her friendship with Livia	II	
Messalina	Poppaea Sabina Maj.	6.1	In the Gardens of Lucullus affair	I	None found
	Appius Silanus	4.68, 6.9, 11.29	Her step-father. She had him accused of plotting assassination (according to Tacitus, because he rejected her advances), and thereby executed.	I	Suet. <i>Claud.</i> 29.1 Suet. <i>Claud.</i> 37.1 Cass. Dio. 60.14-15
	Livilla	6.2, 13.32	See above. Messalina either convinced her to commit suicide (in Tacitus) or was executed (accounts vary).	II	None found
	Valerius Asiaticus	11.2	In the Gardens of Lucullus affair	I	Cass. Dio. 61.29
Locusta	Claudius	12.65-9	First attempted to	II	<i>Apoc.</i> 1-6

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Agrippina Minor			kill via a poisoned or poisonous mushroom, then through a feather with a drop of poison		Jos. <i>Ant.</i> 20.148 <i>Octavia</i> Pliny <i>NH</i> 22.92 Juv. <i>Sat.</i> 5.146-8 Martial 1.20 Suet. <i>Claud.</i> 44.2-46 Suet. <i>Nero</i> 33.1 Cass. Dio 60.34-35
	"Britannicus' Best Tutors"	12.41	Ordered some executed and some exiled, and replaced with those of her own choice	I	None Found
	Domitia Lepida	12.64	Accused her of witchcraft and sentenced to death.	II	None Found
	Silanus	13.1	Court favorites of Nero, who she believed were too powerful.	I	Pliny <i>NH</i> 7.58 Cass. Dio 61.6.4
	Narcissus				None Found