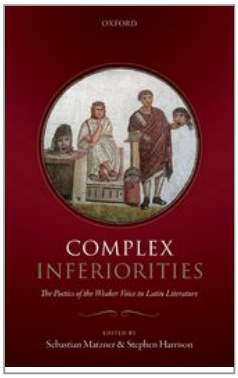
12-2018

From Adultery to Incest: Messalina and Agrippina as Sexual Aggressors in Tacitus' Annals

Vassiliki Panoussi
William & Mary, panoussi@wm.edu



Complex Inferiorities: The Poetics of the Weaker Voice in Latin Literature
Sebastian Matzner and Stephen Harrison

Print publication date: 2018
Print ISBN-13: 9780198814061
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: December 2018
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198814061.001.0001

From Adultery to Incest

Messalina and Agrippina as Sexual Aggressors in Tacitus' *Annals*

Vassiliki Panoussi

DOI:10.1093/oso/9780198814061.003.0012

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter continues the investigation of rhetorical maneuvers clustering around social and amorous hierarchies in the fraught sphere of sexual agency by studying the trope of the sexually aggressive older female preying on a younger man in Tacitus' *Annals*. On the basis of a detailed examination of the portrayal of Messalina and Agrippina, it argues that it is precisely the recognizable rhetoricity and artificiality in the deployment of this trope, here dramatized through rich intertextual echoes and connections (notably Vergil's *Aeneid* and Euripides' *Bacchae*), which narratively undercuts any unambiguous condemnation of female superiority over male inferiority, disrupts any simple re-assertion of traditional Roman gender hierarchies, and opens up the text to alternative interpretations beyond the reach of the narrator's authority.

Keywords: Messalina, Agrippina, Tacitus, Annals, gender, sexuality, Julio-Claudian dynasty, Latin historiography, intertextuality, Vergil

In Roman texts, independent women, such as courtesans, rich *matronae*, or widows, often pursue younger men. From Roman comedy to Republican oratory, and from elegy and the novel to imperial historiography, we often see powerful women reversing traditional gender hierarchies by placing men in a subordinate position. In this essay, I examine the portraits of Messalina and Agrippina in Tacitus' *Annals*, which match other representations of an elite, sexually aggressive woman preying on a younger man. Further, I argue that in Tacitus' narratives there is a larger literary and rhetorical trope at work, which I believe

can be traced back to Cicero and Livy. I propose that the narratives employing this trope increasingly emphasize female sexual aggression and confer greater power on the woman, a process culminating in Tacitus' memorable portrayals of the adulterous Messalina and the incestuous Agrippina the Younger.

Tacitus' depiction of the empresses' sexuality as particularly aggressive, even monstrous, reverses the norms of female sexuality and agency that Roman ideology had established in famous *exempla* of wives and mothers, such as Lucretia, Cornelia, or Arria.[1] In turn, the men's inferiority is rendered especially problematic, as it affects **(p.206)** the emperor's ability to manage his *domus*, and, by extension, his empire. As scholars have argued, the pathology of the royal *domus* is emblematic of the pathology of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, which contrasts favourably with the new regime under whose patronage Tacitus writes.[2] At the same time, however, Tacitus incorporates elements that give voice to other ideological propositions, including those of the monstrous women in his history. This inversion of hierarchies and inferiorities offers a window on to the ideological workings of the *Annals*.[3] I would like to add to this discussion by identifying the trope of the sexually aggressive woman as operative in the *Annals*. I argue that it does not serve simply as a means through which Tacitus can add drama and excitement to his narrative or participate in an intertextual dialogue with his predecessors; more than that, this trope, once recognized as such, allows readers, ancient or modern, to consider Tacitus' historiographical account as a complicated amalgam consisting of both literary artefact and historical truth.[4]

Feminist criticism has done much to show that men's opinions on women should not be taken at face value. Scholars have long identified stereotypes, such as the 'wicked wife', or the 'tart with a heart', which populate the writings of ancient authors. Historiography, rhetoric, and poetry—among other genres—provide ample evidence of similarly negative paradigms and attitudes.[5] In particular, the stereotype of the sexually aggressive older woman seems to come to life[6] with Cicero's portrait of Clodia.[7] She is perhaps the best known **(p.207)** 'cougar' of the Roman world, a rich wife, a *matrona*, who has no moral qualms about committing adultery or incest:[8]

> *Sin ista muliere remota nec crimen ullum nec opes ad oppugnandum M. Caelium illis relinquuntur, quid est aliud quod nos patroni facere debeamus, nisi ut eos qui insectantur, repellamus? Quod quidem facerem vehementius, nisi intercederent mihi inimicitiae cum istius mulieris viro—fratrem volui dicere; semper hic erro….Nec enim muliebres umquam inimicitias mihi gerendas putavi, praesertim cum ea quam omnes semper amicam omnium potius quam cuiusquam inimicam putaverunt.*

> But if, with this woman removed from the case, no charge nor means to attack Caelius is left to our opponents, what else ought we, his lawyers, to do but refute those who attack him? This indeed I would do all the more vigorously, were it not for my personal enmity to that woman's husband—I meant to say brother; I always make this mistake.…For indeed I never thought that I would have to engage in quarrels with women, especially with one whom everyone has always thought to be everyone's friend rather than anyone's enemy.[9]

Cicero paints Clodia's adultery as infamous and, in case the point was not adequately made, he repeatedly calls her a prostitute: he uses the word *meretrix* and its cognates to refer to Clodia nine times. Moreover, he contrasts Clodia's sexual voraciousness with Caelius' youthful inexperience. In a famous passage, Cicero brings back from the dead Clodia's ancestor, Appius Claudius Caecus, who scolds his degenerate offspring:

> *'Mulier, quid tibi cum Caelio, quid cum homine adulescentulo, quid cum alieno? Cur aut tam familiaris huic fuisti ut aurum commodares, aut tam inimica ut venenum timeres?'*
>
> 'Woman, what business do you have with Caelius? What business do you have with a very young man? What business do you have with someone who is not from your family circle? Why have you been such friends with him as to lend him gold, or such enemies as to fear his poison?'[10]

(p.208) Cicero uses the word *adulescens* and its derivatives thirty-nine times in the *Pro Caelio*, thus making it plain that Caelius was at a disadvantage not only because he had no money but also because of his age. Borrowing from Roman comedy, Cicero depicts Caelius as having a strict father (17); Clodia therefore provides him with the means to live comfortably and have a little fun—with strings attached. Cicero's rhetorical strategies were so brilliant that scholars had taken his word as fact.[11] Feminist analysis eventually noted Cicero's use of comedic motifs and stock characters to ridicule and discredit Clodia and successfully refuted the historicity of Cicero's portrait.[12] More recently, scholarly attention has focused on Cicero's depiction of Clodia as a destroyer of homes and reputations,[13] herself the head of a corrupt household, or *domus*, exploiting her privileged status as wife (*matrona*) not for the interest of the state (as other famous wives before her) but to pursue her sexual desires (*libidines*).[14] Cicero's Clodia is the type that preys on younger men of inferior social status and makes them submit to her sexual passions. Historians agree that Cicero's focusing his speech on Clodia has very little to do with the issues at hand, which included a very serious charge of *vis*, or violence against the state, and which had more to do with Roman relations with Egypt than with a December–May affair.[15]

By contrast, in Livy's narrative of the scandal of the Bacchanalia (39.8–19), the wealthy ex-prostitute Faecenia Hispala, who neatly falls into the stereotype of the 'tart with a heart', has an affair with a young man, Aebutius. His corrupt stepfather and mother plan his demise by arranging his initiation into the Bacchic mysteries in hopes that Aebutius will either be murdered or engage in such illicit activities that he can be easily blackmailed. Hispala, who happens to have **(p.209)** inside knowledge of these mysteries, reveals the conspiracy to the authorities and saves not only Aebutius but all Roman youths from sexual and moral corruption and/or death. Her service to the state is rewarded by permission to marry her young lover. Livy's introduction to Hispala illustrates the positive side of the same characteristics that were used by Cicero to denigrate Clodia:

> *Scortum nobile libertina Hispala Faecenia, non digna quaestu cui ancillula adsuerat, etiam postquam manumissa erat, eodem se genere tuebatur. Huic consuetudo iuxta vicinitatem cum Aebutio fuit, minime adulescentis aut rei aut famae damnosa; ultro enim amatus adpetitusque erat, et maligne omnia praebentibus suis meretriculae munificentia sustinebatur. Quin eo processerat consuetudine capta ut post patroni mortem, quia in nullius manu erat, tutore ab tribunis et praetore petito, cum testamentum faceret unum Aebutium institueret heredem*.
>
> There was a well-known courtesan, a freed woman, Hispala Faecenia, not worthy of the occupation to which she applied herself when she was just a slave, and even after she had been manumitted, she supported herself in the same way. Since they were neighbours, a love affair developed between her and Aebutius, not at all detrimental either to the young man's fortune or to his reputation; for he had been loved and sought out by her, and, since his own family provided little for him, he was maintained by the generosity of the courtesan. Moreover, their relationship had progressed to such a degree that, after the death of her patron, since she was under no one's legal control and petitioned the tribunes and the praetor for a guardian, when she made her will, she designated Aebutius as her sole heir.[16]

Despite her low social status, Hispala possesses such moral integrity that she helps put an end to the moral corruption of the entire Roman state. In the quoted passage, we are told that Hispala has assumed some of Aebutius' expenses (since his family did not provide him with adequate funds). When the young man tells her about his plan to attend the mysteries, she warns him against the dangers of Bacchic initiation. Both actions mark her as the mother that Aebutius obviously lacks. She also acts as a wife, providing sexual companionship and legally offering her fortune to him after her death (39.9.7).[17] Unlike Clodia, who uses her money to control Caelius and whose bad morals and sexual lust put in jeopardy not only Caelius but also the whole of Roman society,

Hispala acts like other famous *matronae* **(p.210)** from history in that she ensures the safety of other male citizens and therefore contributes to the welfare of the entire Roman state.

This trope of the powerful, sexually aggressive female shifts yet again in Tacitus' imperial historiography, as it is now applied to the portraits of the Julio-Claudian empresses, especially Messalina and Agrippina the Younger. In the case of Messalina, her power and independence allow her to defy the rules of marriage (with her affair and wedding to Gaius Silius), while Agrippina's aggression turns incestuous as it is directed to her son, Nero. The motif then develops from a reversal of gender and social hierarchies to the utter destruction of familial relations.

Turning to Messalina and Agrippina the Younger, historians and literary critics have identified their portraits as misogynistic,[18] although some historians, even quite recently, still consider their alleged sexual exploits as fact.[19] Their prominent role in the historiographical accounts devoted to the reign of the Julio-Claudian emperors reflects an age of transition, with imperial women closer to the sources of power than their Republican predecessors. Fischler (1994) identifies a conflict between approved roles for women which excluded them from power and the possibility of their involvement in public affairs given their importance in the imperial household. Messalina, therefore, is an example of the fears roused by excessive female proximity to the sources of governance. Corbier (1995), on the other hand, argues that the focus on the imperial spouses in Tacitus is a result of the significance of women in the Julio-Claudian line of succession, given the problems of inheritance faced by Augustus and the subsequent Julio-Claudian emperors.

Making use of feminist literary and historical analysis, scholars such as Joshel focus on Messalina's insatiable sexual desire and argue that it reflects the royal *domus*'s encroachment upon the authority of other classes, the senatorial one in particular. Women's vice is part of a larger discourse on empire and helps the historian make a distinction between the 'bad' empire of the past and the 'good' empire of his present.[20] O'Gorman's study of Messalina and Agrippina exposes the **(p.211)** fissures in Tacitus' ideological narrative that include possible versions of events privileging the characters' point of view and thus complicating any easy dichotomies between the Julio-Claudian past and Tacitus' present.[21]

Building on this research, I would like to offer an analysis of the trope or stereotype of the 'sexually aggressive older or independent female preying on a younger male' as available to Tacitus for manipulation to make specific points about the Julio-Claudian *domus*. The narrative presents the empresses in the role of the 'older woman' making advances to younger men in order to demonstrate the distortion of the institution of marriage (through Messalina's wedding with

Silius) and the annihilation of woman's role as mother (through the portrayal of Agrippina's incestuous advances toward her son). Congruent with a narrative strategy that shows the progressive decay of the Julio-Claudian *domus*, the portraits of these empresses devolve from sexual desire for other men to incestuous desire for the son. Tacitus' deployment of the trope through the use of various intertexts—comedic, religious, tragic, and epic—points to its artificiality and therefore undermines his narrative's stigmatization of the empresses as 'bad women'. As a result, my analysis helps identify alternative (familial, social, political, ideological) hierarchies to those purportedly presented by the text.

In what follows, I analyse Tacitus' text and his selective emphasis on male youth and female maturity, or male inferiority and female superiority; I proceed with an examination of the intertexts through which Messalina's destruction of the royal *domus* is dramatized; and I demonstrate how Messalina's and Agrippina's behaviour is couched in similar terms with the aim of castigating the latter's destruction of motherhood. In both cases, the traditional inferiority of women in the Roman *domus* is shattered by the empresses' egregious sexual transgression.[22] Instead of confirming traditional Roman hierarchies, Tacitus' text enables us to recognize the deployment of the trope **(p.212)** and thus casts doubt on the narrator's authority since it permits alternative interpretations of the events he presents and evaluates.

Messalina

Messalina is presented by Tacitus as a nymphomaniac, actively seeking sexual relations with men, regardless of class, rank, or function.[23] This portrayal is congruent with Juvenal's scathing description (6.114–32), where she is named *Lycisca*, a Roman prostitute name.[24] Sexually experienced, and powerful as the emperor's wife, she 'was flowing out to untried lusts' (*ad incognitas libidines profluebat*, 11.26.1)[25] by falling in love with Silius, who is described as a young man of high status (*iuvenem nobilem*, 11.28.1)[26] and most handsome of Rome's youths (*iuventutis Romanae pulcherrimum*, 11.12.2). The stress on Silius' youth is curious given that he is consul designate and therefore at least 30 years old, and married.[27] As a result, he was probably about the same age as Messalina,[28] if not older, since Roman men normally married at a much later age than Roman women.[29] Messalina's implied superiority in age is analogous to her superiority in rank and power.[30] Moreover, Silius' youth **(p.213)** contrasts with Claudius' greater age (*quippe non eo ventum ut senectam principis operiretur*, 'it had not certainly come to this, that they would await the emperor's old age', 11.26.2),[31] whose passivity also points to the role of comedy's *senex*, duped by his adulterous wife and outwitted by his clever slave.[32]

Throughout the *Annals*, Tacitus mentions several of his sources and often evaluates them critically. But his debts are not always disclosed or obvious. Sallust's portrait of Sempronia, for instance, has been identified as instrumental

in Tacitus' depiction of the morally corrupt Poppaea Sabina.[33] Messalina's wedding with Silius and her violent ending contains many dramatic elements,[34] as well as intertextual contact with Vergil's Dido and Amata. Dido's love for Aeneas is famously cast as a type of *furore*; in the *Annals*, the text stresses Messalina's mad love for Silius (*novo et furori proximo amore distinebatur*, 11.12.1). Messalina, like another Dido, burns with desire (*exarserat*, 11.12.2). Like Dido, who performs sacrifices seeking to determine the auspices for a wedding with Aeneas **(p.214)** (Verg. *A.* 4.56–64), Messalina, too, seeks auspices (*auspicum verba*, 11.27) and performs sacrifices (*sacrificasse apud deos*, 11.27). Yet in following closely the wedding protocol (*cuncta nuptiarum sollemnia celebrat*, 'she performs all the solemn rites of marriage', 11.26.3), Messalina aims to destroy Claudius' status as imperial husband, a purpose that the narrator openly acknowledges as a predictable conclusion to her long history of adulterous disregard for her status as wife (*nomen tamen matrimonii concupivit ob magnitudinem infamiae, cuius apud prodigos novissima voluptas est*, 'nevertheless she desired the name of wife so as to obtain the greatest infamy, which is the last source of pleasure for the debauched', 11.26.3). The point is stressed even further: according to the narrator, it was one thing for Messalina to sleep with an actor, another to have an actual wedding ceremony in the palace (*dum histrio cubiculum principis insultaverit, dedecus quidem inlatum, sed* ***excidium*** *procul afuisse*, 'while an actor dishonoured the princeps' bedroom, humiliation might have been inflicted, but *destruction* had still been far in the distance', 11.28.1).[35] Silius was going to replace Claudius without the courtesy of a divorce (*nec enim occultum quid post tale matrimonium superesset*, 'for what would follow after such a wedding was no secret', 11.28.1). The public, official nature of the ceremony is further underscored in the reports to Claudius, who is now deprived of the status of husband (*ni propere agis, tenet urbem* ***maritus***, 'unless you act quickly, the *husband* holds the city', 11.30.2).[36]

Messalina's contempt for her status as wife cannot be expressed through simple adultery (as was the case with other women, such as Cicero's Clodia or Catullus' Lesbia).[37] She distorts the very institution of marriage as a contractual bond between spouses by erasing **(p.215)** Claudius' role as a husband and substituting him with Silius. Her success is evident in Claudius' reaction, asking whether he is still emperor (*satis constat eo pavore offusum Claudium ut identidem interrogaret an ipse imperii potens, an Silius privatus esset*, 'it is quite agreed that Claudius was so overwhelmed by fear that he was asking again and again whether he was still emperor, whether Silius was still a private citizen', 11.31.1). The royal *domus* is determined by Messalina's status as imperial wife, who is free to exchange one husband for another.

Messalina's destruction of her own *domus* is followed by a Bacchic celebration.[38] In Greek and Roman literary texts, Bacchic frenzy is depicted as negating or destroying the household. For Romans, wine-drinking and unchastity go hand in hand, so legislation since the time of Romulus had prohibited drinking for

Roman wives.[39] As a result, what in literature is a symbolic enactment of female encroachment upon the male social or political arena is here rendered in literal terms as a fake celebration of *vindemia*:

> *At Messalina non alias solutior luxu, adulto autumno* ***simulacrum*** *vindemiae per domum celebrabat. urgeri prela, fluere lacus; et feminae pellibus accinctae adsultabant ut sacrificantes vel insanientes Bacchae; ipsa crine fluxo thyrsum quatiens, iuxtaque Silius hedera vinctus, gerere cothurnos, iacere caput, strepente circum procaci choro. ferunt Vettium Valentem lascivia in praealtam arborem conisum, interrogantibus quid aspiceret, respondisse tempestatem ab Ostia atrocem, sive coeperat ea species, seu forte lapsa vox in praesagium vertit.*
>
> But Messalina was indulging in lust more than any other woman; at the height of autumn, she was celebrating a *mock* vintage all over her house. Wine-presses were being stomped and vats flowed; and women, dressed in animal skins, were leaping like Bacchants either sacrificing or in ecstasy; Messalina herself was brandishing a thyrsus with flowing hair, next to her, Silius, crowned in ivy, wearing buskins and tossing his head, while all around a lustful chorus was making a ruckus. They say that Vettius Valens had climbed a tall tree as a joke and to those inquiring **(p.216)** what he saw, he responded 'a terrible storm from Ostia', whether that sight was beginning to appear or his accidental utterance turned into prophecy.[40]

Messalina's *simulacrum vindemiae* shares much with Amata's fake Bacchic revel in the *Aeneid* (7.373–405), which aims at destroying the impending wedding of Lavinia to Aeneas.[41] The Latin queen's Bacchic revel results in the death of a young man, Turnus, and brings about her own demise. In addition, Amata's desire for Turnus as a son-in-law has made some scholars posit that her feelings may have sexual roots.[42] In this light, Messalina's kinship with the Vergilian queen perhaps emerges as less surprising. Within this context, several other Vergilian elements become apparent: the women are described as dancing about dressed in animal skins like Bacchants in sacrifice or in ecstasy (*feminae pellibus accinctae adsultabant ut sacrificantes vel insanientes Bacchae*, 11.31.2) as are the Latin women in Verg. *A.* 7.396 (*incinctae pellibus*, 'dressed in fawnskins').[43] Just like Amata (*ipsa inter medias flagrantem fervida pinum | sustinet*, 'in the middle, (sc. Amata) herself in a frenzy holds a flaming pine torch', Verg. *A.* 7.397–8), Messalina is the leader of the Bacchic dance, shaking the thyrsus (*ipsa crine fluxo thyrsum quatiens*, 11.31.2).[44]

Turning to the description of Silius, Tacitus mobilizes another intertext, that of the tragic stage, by presenting him as wearing the big platform shoes that the actors wore on stage (*gerere cothurnos*, 11.31.2). Dancing also plays a prominent role (*feminae…adsultabant*, **(p.217)** 11.31.2); Silius tosses his head in ecstasy (*iacere caput*, 11.31.2);[45] and a noisy chorus is also present (*strepente*

circum procaci choro, 11.31.2).[46] Moreover, connections specific to Euripides' *Bacchae* are evident in the description of Vettius Valens' climbing of a tree, on the model of Pentheus (*in praealtam arborem conisum*, 11.31.3),[47] and uttering a prophecy (*praesagium*) of impending destruction.

Accordingly, we can see a progression in the depiction of Silius: he initially assumes an active role by proposing marriage to Messalina (11.26)[48] and colludes with her both out of necessity and due to his moral corruption (11.12.2). At the wedding party, however, he has a more feminine role, as we have seen, tossing his head like a maenad.[49] His status as a Roman *vir* may be seen as eventually restored in the scene of his death, where he does not attempt to resist death or protect Messalina but asks for death to be quick (11.35.2). Irony, however, attends this display of Stoic *constantia*, given Silius' conduct which is far from the ideal of the Roman *vir*.[50] His moral disgrace becomes poignantly obvious in Tacitus' reference to the display in Silius' home of his father's *effigies* (image), which had been banned by decree of the senate and could be thus used as evidence of Silius' potential to be a traitor himself.[51]

Intertextual contact with the *Aeneid* persists, with *rumor* making an appearance at the beginning of the next chapter (*non rumor* ***(p.218)*** *interea, se undique nuntii incedunt*, 'meanwhile not only rumor but also messengers arrive from all around', 11.32.1),[52] as is the case after Dido's supernatural wedding ceremony to Aeneas (Verg. *A.* 4.173–90) and Amata's fake Bacchic ceremony (Verg. *A.* 7.392–6).[53] In the first instance, *rumor* or *fama* destroys Dido; in the second, it triggers the war between the Latins and the Trojans.[54] Accordingly, Claudius now assumes the same silence displayed by King Latinus in the *Aeneid* (*mirum inter haec silentium Claudii*, 11.35.1) along with his feminine seclusion and passivity (*domum regressus*, 11.37.2).[55]

Wine also works as a sexual stimulant on men, thus providing a means through which Messalina can exercise undue influence on Claudius. The narrator states that when inebriated, the emperor's sympathies toward her return:

> *Nam Claudius domum regressus et tempestivis epulis delenitus, ubi vino incaluit, iri iubet nuntiarique* ***miserae*** *(hoc enim verbo usum ferunt) dicendam ad causam postera die adesset. Quod ubi auditum et languescere ira, redire amor ac, si cunctarentur, propinqua nox et uxorii cubiculi memoria timebantur*.
>
> For Claudius had returned home and was soothed by an early dinner; when he grew warm with wine, he ordered someone to go and announce to the *poor woman* (for they say he used that word) that she should be present the next day to plead her cause. Hearing this, and seeing that his anger was beginning to cool, his love returning, they feared, in case they delayed, the approaching night and the memories of the marriage bed.[56]

Claudius' memory of his marriage to Messalina (with its attendant sexuality)[57] is so powerful that it almost erases the knowledge of its destruction, shown by Claudius' reference to her as *misera*. Messalina's subsequent pleading with Claudius also points to intertextual contact **(p.219)** with Dido's famous speeches to Aeneas, where she dwells on her potential role as mother (Verg. *A.* 4.327–30).[58] The empress reminds Claudius of their children, Octavia and Britannicus. Indeed, Claudius is moved by Messalina's evocation of motherhood (see also 11.34.3 and Joshel 1997: 243), the sole social and familial role that she has not yet destroyed.

The scene of Messalina's death alludes to Dido's suicide, sharply contrasting her cowardly attitude towards impending death with Dido's brave determination. Messalina's mother (a woman advisor, like Dido's sister Anna) unsuccessfully tries to persuade her to commit suicide. Eventually, Messalina tries the sword, like Dido (*ferrumque accepit*, 'she took the sword', 11.38.1) but her fear renders her ineffective (*frustra iugulo aut pectori per trepidationem admovens*, 'applying it without success to her throat and breast because of her fear', 11.38.1) and a tribune steps in to finish the job (*ictu tribuni transfigitur*, 'she is run through by a blow from the tribune', 11.38.1).[59] Tacitus' famous comment that the story may verge on the mythical (*fabulosum*, 11.27.1) can thus be shown to apply to the entire narrative arc of Messalina's actions and reveals a consciousness of his account's rich literary pedigree.[60] Tacitus' heavily intertexualized version of events demonstrates the intimate and complex interplay between historiography and other forms of learned discourse, such as literature.[61]

(p.220) Agrippina

Agrippina is depicted as going even further than Messalina, dismantling Roman ideas regarding motherhood. In Tacitus' view, she displays the same rapacious female sexuality as Messalina, not because she is a nymphomaniac, but out of a desire to attain power. In the process, she effects a further devolution of the 'bad wife' trope, because she directs her sexual aggression not towards other younger men but towards her son, Nero. Tacitus' description of Agrippina's sexual aggression towards her son deploys elements similar with Messalina's sexual advances to Claudius:

> *Tradit Cluvius ardore retinendae Agrippinam potentiae*[62] *eo usque provectam, ut medio diei, cum id temporis Nero per vinum et epulas incalesceret, offerret se saepius temulento comptam et incesto paratam.*
>
> Cluvius reports that Agrippina's ardour to retain her power had come to such a point, that in the middle of the day, when at that time Nero had grown warm with wine and feasting, she would often present herself to him being tipsy all decked out and ready for incest.[63]

Both women use their sexual powers to control men. Like Claudius (11.35), Nero, too, is said to be susceptible to sexual advances while tipsy (*temulento*) and having feasted (*per vinum et epulas*). The heat of the day (*medio diei*) also contributes to his eagerness for sex while the same verb (*incalesco*) is used to describe both Claudius' (11.37.2, quoted above) and Nero's sexual arousal. The passage constitutes the first mention of Agrippina's incestuous behaviour toward her son, although the narrator hastens to add that it was not the first time it had occurred. Quite the contrary, it was so well known to the emperor's inner circle (*adnotantibus proximis*, 14.2.1) and to the army (*pervulgatum esse incestum… nec toleraturos milites profani principis imperium*, 'that the incestuous relationship was commonly known…and that the soldiers were not going to tolerate the rule of a corrupt emperor', 14.2.1), that Seneca tried to divert Nero's desire toward other women (*contra muliebres inlecebras subsidium a femina petivisse*, 'against feminine temptations he sought help from a woman', 14.2.1).

(p.221) According to the narrator, unlike the 'nymphomaniac' Messalina, Agrippina's motives are not sexual. She only desires power and she will stop at nothing to retain it (*ardore retinendae potentiae*, 14.2.1). Indeed, her past behaviour serves to justify the narrator's claim, since she first committed adultery as a young girl with Lepidus (*puellaribus annis stuprum cum Lepido spe dominationis admiserat*, 14.2.2),[64] had had sex with a freedman (*pari cupidine usque ad libita Pallantis provoluta*, 14.2.2) and then married her uncle (*et exercita ad omne flagitium patrui nuptiis*, 14.2.2). The term *flagitium* is used both in the case of Nero and Claudius, thus branding both liaisons as incest.[65] Agrippina's incestuous actions are yet another sign of her dissolute state and her hunger for power.

As in the case of Messalina's wedding with Silius, so in that of Agrippina's incest, Tacitus displays a certain uneasiness vis-à-vis his sources. In 14.2.2 he discusses at length the information available to him, much like he did after Messalina's wedding rites. He states that, according to Cluvius, it was Agrippina who made incestuous advances, while Fabius Rusticus credits Nero with the initiative. Tacitus eventually sides with Cluvius, adding that other authors, and *fama*, concur (*et fama huc inclinat*).[66] He further bolsters this claim by arguing, as we have seen, that Agrippina's tactics evolved from general sexual promiscuity to incest.[67] Joshel notes that in the case of Messalina, Tacitus resorts to evidence that elsewhere he had evaluated differently.[68] I argue that the passage on Agrippina points to the same tactic.

The death of Agrippina presents some striking differences from that of Messalina. Tacitus' historical account employs masterful suspense, when Nero's efforts to kill his mother repeatedly prove unsuccessful. Messalina's demise is swift, displaying Narcissus' effective leadership and the empress's cowardice. By contrast, Agrippina rises **(p.222)** to action and epigram. Having been wounded,

she displays her womb, symbolically exposing the full significance of Nero's actions.[69] Her final words, *ventrem feri* (14.8.5) have all the force of a *sententia*, as the emphasis is on *ventrem* while the imperative follows, unlike normal usage.[70] Agrippina's final moments perhaps display the moral difficulties involved in matricide as well as the extent of her resourcefulness. As in Messalina's final moments, here too, the narrative becomes highly stylized.

In a narrative that dramatizes the decline of empire, the women of the court also decline. Agrippina is a more corrupt version of Messalina. The former, by marrying while married, creates a distorted paradigm for the institution of marriage; the latter, by engaging in sexual relations with her son, negates normative ideas on motherhood. Tacitus has made a point of the value of Agrippina's role as mother earlier in the narrative of Nero's accession to the throne. When asked by the tribune of the guard for a password, Nero's answer was *optima mater* (13.2.3), an indication of the importance of Agrippina for his reign.[71] Even when subject to debate, Agrippina's agency in the case of incest is key to the potency of Tacitus' larger argument that the Julio-Claudian empresses reflect the decay of the emperor's *domus*. Messalina's advances to younger men are taken up by her successor Agrippina but fall to a new low, so that the woman now preys not on Roman youths of the upper classes but on the emperor himself, even though he is her son.

In conclusion, the manipulation of the trope of the sexually aggressive woman in the portraits of Messalina and Agrippina in Tacitus' *Annals* not only serves specific narrative strategies but also seeks to reinforce established hierarchies (gender, familial, social, and political). At the same time, however, the reader's ability to discern these historical characters as part of a trope spanning various types of literary and public discourse creates a deeply nuanced text that invites multiple levels of reading. When they behave like other famous **(p.223)** literary heroines before them, Messalina and Agrippina become literary creations subject to further interpretation, manipulation, or even redemption. Tacitus' narrative then presents one possible version of events out of many, while definitive interpretation remains elusive. As a result, the inferiorities that Tacitus' history so carefully deploys are exposed as a construction, a narrative strategy. In this light, Messalina and Agrippina's portraits further reveal the deep complexity of the ideological processes recorded and explicated in the *Annals*. **(p.224)**

Notes:

([1]) Lucretia: Liv. 1.57–8; Cornelia: Plut. *CG* 4.3–4, *TG* 1.4–5, V. Max. 4.4 praef; Arria: Plin. *Ep*. 3.16.

([2]) See e.g. O'Gorman (2000); Ginsburg (2006: 106–32); Joshel (1997).

([3]) See e.g. O'Gorman (2000).

([4]) On this topic, see also O’Gorman (2015); Damon (2010); Woodman (1988: 106–25).

([5]) See e.g. Gray-Fow (1988) on the wicked stepmother, Richlin (1992: 81–104) on invective, and Ginsburg (2006: 106–32) on Agrippina the Younger and literary and rhetorical stereotypes. On invective against old women in particular, see Richlin (1992: 109–16). To be sure, our literary and other sources demonstrate that Roman *matronae* exercised a great deal of influence, but their agency was subject to an ‘ideological system that was always ready to belittle them, and that approved of them only insofar as they ratified the social assessment of themselves as the property of individual men for the production of children, and that saw them as always prone to lapses into unchastity’ (Richlin 2014a: 222).

([6]) Roman comedy displays a number of independent women but no older women preying on younger men successfully. See Rosivach (1998: 107–39) for a typology of the role of independent women in Roman comedy.

([7]) On Cicero’s Clodia and the use of stereotypes, see e.g. Geffcken (1973); Skinner (1983); Richlin (1992: 84–6).

([8]) Catullus also manipulates the same motifs in the depiction of Lesbia (probably to be identified with Cicero’s Clodia) as sexually voracious or downright monstrous: see especially poems 11, 58. On the identification, see Skinner (1983).

([9]) Cic. *Cael.* 32. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

([10]) Cic. *Cael.* 33.

([11]) E.g. Rankin (1969).

([12]) On the former, see Geffcken (1973); on the latter, Skinner (1983). The first full biography of Clodia with a critical assessment of all sources is Skinner (2011). Salzman (1982) demonstrated the importance of the *Ludi Megalenses* in Cicero’s argumentation that draws parallels between Clodia’s liaison with Caelius and the myth of Cybele and the young Attis (302).

([13]) Leen (2000–1: 150–1) argues that Appius Claudius Caecus’ rebuke to Clodia in (33) points to the difference in status between her noble families, the Claudii and the Metelli, and the equestrian Caelius.

([14]) See Leen (2000–1: 151–4) for a comparison between Clodia and Lucretia. Leen (157) points out that Clodia’s house is described as *libidinosa* (55) and links it to other references in the speech of her *libido*.

([15]) See Wiseman (1985: 54–91).

([16]) Liv. 39.9.5–7.

([17]) On Hispala in this role, see Panoussi forthcoming.

([18]) See e.g. Joshel (1997); Corbier (1995); and Fischler (1994); as well as Kaplan (1979); Santoro L'Hoir (1994); and O'Gorman (2000).

([19]) E.g. Bauman (1992: 166–205); see also Joshel's (1997: 227–8) criticism of Levick (1990).

([20]) Joshel (1997: 223): 'Tacitus's Messalina is a representation that enables the historian to draw a difficult distinction between present and past, good empire and bad. As such, Messalina functions as a sign in a discourse of imperial power that simultaneously informs, if not determines, her image.'

([21]) See O'Gorman (2000: 106–21 on Messalina, and 122–43 on Agrippina).

([22]) To be sure, as Gregory Hutchinson reminds me, imperial women had an important public persona, attested by coins, sculpture, etc. On Agrippina, see Ginsburg (2006: 55–105). For example, both Messalina and Agrippina had privileges in the use of a *carpentum*, a carriage (D.C. 60.22.2, Suet. *Cl*. 17.3, Tac. *Ann*. 12.42.2).

([23]) Tacitus mentions senators, equestrians, a freedman, and Mnester the actor; see Joshel (1997: 231). Messalina's adultery has been identified as a means to blackmail senators; see Bauman (1992: 168). Messalina demanded they be present while their wives engaged in sex with other men (D.C. 60.18.1–2). As complicit in their wives' adultery, the senators would be punishable by Augustan law. In addition, her relationship with Mnester, the actor, has been interpreted as a means through which her memory can be obliterated; see O'Gorman (2000: 120–1).

([24]) On Juvenal's passage, see Joshel (1997: 248).

([25]) As translated by Joshel (1997: 230); see also her discussion on Messalina's desire (230–5).

([26]) On Tacitus' use of the term *nobilis* and Silius' nobility, see Malloch 2013: *ad loc.* (414–15).

([27]) Hutchinson rightly pointed out in his conference response that Silius' age fits with his father's consulship in 13 CE (PIR^2 S 718, cf. 714) and that Caelius is also in his 30s at the time of the *Pro Caelio*.

([28]) Messalina's age is disputed, her birth date ranging from 3 to 26 CE. On the question, see Bauman (1992: 167–8).

([29]) See Treggiari 1991. Note also that Messalina's base character is opposed to Silius' 'good' wife, Silana (*nobilem feminam*, 11.12.2).

([30]) Messalina's attraction to young men is also evident in the case of Traulus Montanus (*is, modesta* ***iuventa****, sed corpore insigni, accitus ultro noctemque intra unam a Messalina proturbatus erat*, 'that one, a modest but extraordinarily handsome *young man*, had been summoned unasked and dismissed by Messalina within one night', 11.36.3).

([31]) Malloch 2013: *ad loc*. (402) points out that Claudius was 57 and suggests that *senecta* here means 'death'. Malloch also notes that the use of the word *principis* to describe Claudius reveals the political aspect of Silius' argument, since he does not mention Claudius in a private capacity.

([32]) See Joshel (1997: 228).

([33]) Fischler (1994: 118–20). Similarities to mythical stories are also included in imperial historiography; for instance, in Suetonius' *Nero*, Messalina is said to have tried to assassinate him as a baby by planting snakes in his crib, just like Hera did with Heracles. Tacitus also mentions this story (*vulgabaturque adfuisse infantiae eius dracones in modum custodum*, 'it was commonly told that when he was a baby two snakes had watched over him as guardians', 11.11.3) but gives it no credit (*fabulosa et externis miraculis adsimilata*, 'a fable made to resemble foreign miracles', 11.11.3).

([34]) Hutchinson, in his conference response, suggests that the entire arc of Books 11–14 in the *Annals* is 'a squalid *Oresteia*', with Agrippina killing her husband like Clytemnestra (e.g. Antipho 1.17, Juv. 6.656–61) and her son killing her, like Orestes (e.g. Suet. *Nero* 39.2, Juv. 8.211–21, Dio 62.16.2[2] (Xiph)). On the *Oresteia* in Tacitus' *Annales* and especially 1.3–11, see Santoro L'Hoir (2006: 15–70). Another element that points to the dramatic nature of the Messalina narrative is that the beginning of her 'bad behaviour', the seizing of the gardens of Asiaticus (11.1), also constitutes the setting for her end (11.36). See Joshel (1997: 228). Asiaticus' gardens are also mentioned by Dio as the scenery of Messalina's death and the cause of her fall 61.31.5 (Xiph., Zon.). Similarly, gardens seem to be a larger symbol for desire and death: Nero sends Agrippina to the Tusculan gardens in order for her to rest (14.3.1), all the while planning her demise.

([35]) As pointed out by Hutchinson (in his conference response), citing [Sen.] *Oct*. 269, *lapsam domum* of Messalina's family and Rodighiero (2013), *excidium* refers to the metaphorical fall of Claudius' *domus*. With the reading offered here, I propose that Messalina's destruction of her marriage signals the overthrow of Claudius and his *domus* from imperial power.

([36]) Malloch (2013) *ad loc.* (428) states: ‘a sharp end to the speech, demonstrates that Messalina’s remarriage was a challenge simultaneously to Claudius as *princeps* and husband.’ The magnitude of the attack on Claudius’ *domus* is rendered more vivid through its personification: the house of the emperor shudders (*domus principis inhorruerat*, 11.28.1, Joshel 1997: 225).

([37]) Tacitus’ historical narratives are full of virtuous wives who contrast with the Julio-Claudian women and reflect the morality of the current imperial order (see Joshel 1997: 239–42).

([38]) On the Bacchic element in the *Aeneid*, see Panoussi (2009: 115–44); in Roman literature more generally, see Panoussi (forthcoming).

([39]) Also noted by Joshel (1997: 243). On the antiquity of such laws dating from Romulus’ time, see FIRA^2, vol. 1, p. 3 and Lefkowitz and Fant (2005: 94). See also Verg. *A.* 1.737 with Servius’ comment. On Vergil’s passage, see Panoussi (2009: 99). On women and wine in Roman society more generally, see, e.g., Bettini (1995a, 1995b) and Russell (2003).

([40]) Tac. *Ann.* 11.31.2–3.

([41]) See Panoussi (2009: 128–31). It is notable that D.C. 61.31.4 (Xiph., Zon.) reports this celebration but does not enter into detail other than describe it as a κῶμος: συμπόσιόν τέ τι περιβόητον συνεκρότησε καὶ κῶμον ἀσελγέστατον ἐκώμασεν, ‘she put together a legendary banquet and celebrated an extremely lewd revel’. For a comparison between Dio’s and Tacitus’ accounts of this event and Tacitus’ reworking of Euripides, see Santoro L’Hoir (2006: 235–7).

([42]) Many have also noted an underlying theme of incestuous love and similarities with Euripides’ Phaedra and Oedipus’ Jocasta, especially in the scene of Amata’s suicide in Verg. *A.* 12.595–603. See Panoussi (2009: 125–7, with bibliography).

([43]) Henrichs (1978: 157–9) lists the literary intertexts of Tacitus’ passage and posits that the festival celebrated by Messalina and Silius was an artificial recreation of a rural *vindemia* with Dionysian myth playfully reenacted. Even so, Henrichs still assumes that the Bacchic celebration occurred, as is evident from his statement that ‘Valeria Messalina will have inherited her flair for Bacchic ostentation from her great-grandfather Mark Antony’ (159).

([44]) Henrichs (1978: 157 n. 113) also cites Catul. 64.254.

([45]) Silius also bears an ivy crown on his head (*hederae vinctus*, 11.31.2). MacGóráin suggests to me that the scene re-enacts the sacred marriage of Basilinna, wife of King Archon at Athens, with the god Dionysus. Tacitus then

inverts a positive rite that promotes fertility and prosperity in Athenian civic life. In this scenario, then, Silius could be read as a Bacchus figure.

([46]) Malloch (2013) *ad loc.* (436) notes: '[T]he rhythm of this statement is appropriately imitative of a tragic *chorus*; at the same time the *chorus* parodies Claudius' *consilium*: *strepente circum* looks back to the *circumstrepunt* of Claudius' own chorus of councillors (11.31.1).'

([47]) Henrichs (1978: 159 n. 118) notes the similarity with E. *Ba*. 1061: ὄχθων δ' ἔπ'ἰ ἀμβὰς ἐς ἐλάτην ὑψαύχενα, 'but having climbed that tall-necked fir tree overhanging the banks'.

([48]) Joshel (1997: 225).

([49]) Silius' ecstatic dancing and actor-like attire diminish his status as a Roman *vir*. This is not to ignore that Bacchic rites included a strong male presence; however, in Roman thought male participation in Bacchic rites is a sign of effeminacy, as seen in numerous literary representations of such rites, with Livy's Bacchanalian narrative being a classic example. See Panoussi forthcoming.

([50]) On the difficulties surrounding Silius' *constantia* and that of other executed Roman *equites* (11.35.3), see Malloch (2013) *ad loc.* (453–4).

([51]) See Malloch (2013) *ad loc.* (450–1).

([52]) Compare also 11.34.1: *crebra posthac fama fuit, inter diversas principis voces, cum modo incusaret flagitia uxoris…* ('there was a recurring rumour later that among the contradictory comments of the emperor, who at one moment complained about the scandals of his wife…'). On the function of *rumor* as a literary device in Tacitus more generally, see Autin (2015).

([53]) See Panoussi (2009: 131–2).

([54]) On *Fama* in the *Aeneid*, see Hardie (2012: 78–112).

([55]) On Latinus' silence and retirement to his *domus* (Verg. *A.* 7.599–600) as marks of his feminization, see Panoussi (2009: 132).

([56]) Tac. *Ann.* 11.37.2.

([57]) On the power of Messalina's sexuality, see also Joshel (1997: 233).

([58]) Admittedly, she mentions the child as alleviating the pain of Aeneas' departure. Yet it is plausible that the image she paints of her 'little Aeneas' evokes her image as a mother and acts as an incentive for Aeneas to stay.

([59]) Tacitus presentation of Messalina as a failed version of Dido is also underscored by the role Narcissus plays in her demise. See Malloch (2013: 392–8).

([60]) Fiachra MacGóráin draws my attention to the fact that Tacitus' account portrays imperial courtly life as theatrical, as if life were imitating art. *fabulosus* in 11.11, however, as we have seen, refers to an incredible or fictitious account.

([61]) Gender is not the only hierarchy reversed in the episode. Earlier in Book 11 Messalina is shown to plot with the palace's freedmen to bring down her enemies by prosecuting them on false or fabricated charges (11.1–4). Dio's epitomized account supports this: Messalina and the freedmen are almost always mentioned together (e.g. αἴτιοι δὲ τούτου οἵ τε Καισάρειοι καὶ ἡ Μεσσαλῖνα ἐγένοντο, 'the imperial freedmen and Messalina were behind this', D.C. 60.14.1; see also 60.15.5 Narcissus only; 60.16.2, 17.5, 17.8; 61.30.6 (Zon); 61.31.2 (Xiph.)). Messalina is alone, however, during her sexual exploits (60.18.1).

([62]) *Potentia* in Tacitus has a negative connotation. On Messalina and *potentia*, see Joshel (1997: 233). See also Syme (1958: 413); Benario (1964: 100–1).

([63]) Tac. *Ann.* 14.2.1.

([64]) *Stuprum* means not only adultery but also illicit sexual acts. Adams (1982: 201) and Williams (2010: 67) note that it encompasses all disgraceful sexual behaviour, including but not limited to homoerotic sex.

([65]) Compare *praenuntiatas* ***flagitii*** *blanditias*, 14.2.1 (Nero) with *exercita ad omne* ***flagitium*** *patrui nuptiis*, 14.2.2 (Claudius).

([66]) On a discussion on *fama* and Agrippina's use of it as a means to control imperial ideology, see O'Gorman (2000: 124–32).

([67]) On Agrippina, incest, and the problems it presents to the Roman state, see also Ginsburg (2006: 119–21).

([68]) Joshel (1997: 229).

([69]) In this, Agrippina resembles Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, who displays her breast to Orestes (*Ch*. 896–8), although the gesture is part of her efforts to avoid death. The irony cannot be lost on the audience, who have met a true maternal figure in Orestes' nurse earlier in the play (A. *Ch*. 734–65).

([70]) I am grateful to Gregory Hutchinson for these observations.

([71]) See Bauman (1992: 167). O’Gorman (2000: 132–3) sees Agrippina’s relationship with her son as complicated. Once able to make Nero emperor, she remains capable of making someone else emperor.