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# Founded Upon Death: A Structural Analysis of Tacitus' Annales

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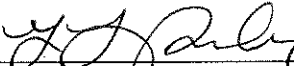
Founded Upon Death: A Structural Analysis of Tacitus' *Annales*


A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Classical Studies from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Nicholas Arthur Rudman

Accepted for HIGHEST HONORS  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

  
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Towards the beginning of the extant text of the eleventh book of Tacitus' *Annales*, the senator Valerius Asiaticus commits suicide, compelled by the emperor Claudius. He certainly cuts a noble figure. As Asiaticus prepares to die, he rejects his friends' advice that he pursue a gentle death by starvation, opting instead for a braver method. He then calmly performs his usual exercises, bathes, feasts cheerfully, and mocks both the emperor's wife and her agent, who were responsible for his forced suicide. Even in his final moments, Asiaticus shows no fear of his impending fate, unconcernedly ordering his funeral pyre to be moved to an area where the flames would not harm his garden. The scene is powerful. Throughout it, the condemned man displays an impressive self-control that contrasts with the impulsiveness and lack of restraint that characterize Claudius and his wife Messalina. The episode also points to a fascination that will occupy the historian throughout his work: death.

Death is, in short, everywhere in the *Annales*. In fact, a count reveals that there are over 150 instances in which named characters die<sup>1</sup> within the course of Tacitus' history. When deaths are so common, one cannot help but wonder why. The first answer that springs to mind is that the Julio-Claudian principate was a deadly place. Indeed it was, at least as the historian tells it, but a more careful consideration reveals that this is not in and of itself a sufficient answer. After all, there have been many deadly events throughout history, but it is difficult to imagine a modern historian writing a work of equal length to the *Annales* that would mention so many named characters dying.

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<sup>1</sup> The precise number that I have found was 155. It is important to note that, if anything, this total is a significant underestimate. I did not include individuals whose deaths were mentioned only in passing, like that of Marcus Claudius Marcellus (Tac. *Ann.* 1.3.1), or any unnamed characters, the inclusion of which would have raised the number considerably. Furthermore, I counted passages in which multiple characters died at the same time only once, and thus the seven people executed for their knowledge of Messalina's plot (Tac. *Ann.* 11.35.3), for example, constitute one entry on the list. In any case, it is clear from these numbers that death is a particularly common occurrence within the *Annales*.

Furthermore, it can be assumed that Tacitus did not report every noteworthy death that occurred during this period, and thus, it can be inferred that he had some reason (or rather 155 reasons) for deciding that the ones he chose to include were important.

The purpose of this thesis is to shed light on some of those reasons. Obviously, some death scenes can be explained by the importance of the individual. For example, given that the emperor Tiberius dominates the first six books of the *Annales*, it seems entirely reasonable that the author would recount his final moments. Some also have thematic significance, allowing Tacitus to express his views on proper conduct and morality. Valerius Asiaticus' suicide appears to do so, and the historian overtly praises the freedwoman Epicharis' death and contrasts it with the shameful ones of various senators (Tac. *Ann.* 15.57.2). There are also other, more immediate considerations, such as an interest in the relatives of individuals whom Tacitus himself knew.<sup>2</sup> These reasons are valid, but they are not the focus of this project. Instead, I will argue that death scenes within the *Annales* have structural significance. In other words, they provide a framework around which the historian can construct his narrative, allowing Tacitus to present the events of the Julio-Claudian principate as constituting a recognizably developing sequence, rather than a collection of various disorganized anecdotes.

I will make this point by arguing two smaller ones. The first is that deaths mark key points of transition within the *Annales*. Throughout the work, they serve to show changes in the balance of power, introduce particularly important characters, highlight the beginnings and ends of periods, and emphasize shifts in operations on the Palatine. This function is more explicit at the beginning of the history, but over time more subtle

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<sup>2</sup> Syme 2012, 256.

variations occur, and by the time of Nero's reign the mere appearance of a death can serve as an indication that a passage is important. The other main argument is that these deaths trace the development of the Julio-Claudian principate into greater and greater tyranny. Specifically, the increasing corruption of the emperors and their advisors, as well as the decreasing power of the senate, is reflected in Tacitus' accounts of the final moments of Rome's citizens. In general, this means that characters will be murdered in increasingly cruel and brazen ways as each emperor's reign becomes established, but there are also other ways in which the historian creates this progression. I will not argue that every death has this structural significance, and in fact, I devote considerable attention in the final chapter of this thesis to arguing that many in the Pisonian conspiracy do not. In addition, there are a few outliers in the pattern mentioned above, the significance of which will be explained as they appear. However, I believe that there is clear evidence to support both of these arguments, and that deaths are not only a part of Tacitus' narrative, but also an organizing principle for the *Annales* as a whole.

Before discussing the specifics of individual chapters and the state of the scholarship on this issue, it will be beneficial to establish four points. The first is that Tacitus had considerable freedom as to how to write his history. One could make the argument that the historian did little more than report events as he learned them, and thus there is no deeper meaning behind the arrangement of deaths in the work. Such an argument would be simplistic, and perhaps Sir Ronald Syme phrased it best when he remarked, "The facts were there. Tacitus does not invent. But [Tacitus] takes considerable liberties."<sup>3</sup> As I have mentioned before, Tacitus could choose what

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<sup>3</sup> Syme 1958, 377.

information to include or exclude, providing him the opportunity to craft the narrative as he saw fit. Furthermore, there are some moments, such as the death of Agrippa Postumus and the appearance of the phoenix, which will be discussed in chapters one and three, respectively, where the author appears to have slightly altered the chronology for his own purposes. Finally, Tacitus had the freedom to arrange events within their years as he wished. In chapter three, I will argue that the order of the deaths of Drusus, Agrippina, Cocceius Nerva, and Plancina, all of which occurred around the same time, holds significance. Presumably, Tacitus could have changed this order without difficulty, providing yet another opportunity for arranging deaths in an important sequence. In sum, the author was not completely bound by the historical events, and could exercise control over his narrative in various ways. With this in mind, his death scenes should be considered the products of choice and potential components of the work's structure.

The second point is to define the term *exitus*. In this thesis, I will use *exitus* to refer to death scenes in which the act of dying is described in considerable detail. In other words, an *exitus* is more than just a comment that a character died. It describes how individuals faced their ends, often including the character's final words. Under this rubric, episodes like the deaths of Valerius Asiaticus (Tac. *Ann.* 11.3.2), Agrippina the Younger (14.8.3-5), and Germanicus (2.71.1-72.2) would qualify as *exitus*,<sup>4</sup> but those of Vipsania (3.19.3), Latinius Latiaris (6.4.1) or Publius Ostorius (12.39.3) would not. There are borderline cases, but I will only apply the term to passages that unambiguously qualify. It is important to note that the historian does not employ the word *exitus* in this

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<sup>4</sup> *Exitus* is both the singular and plural form of this noun.

manner, and using it for this purpose is my own invention. I believe, however, that it provides a convenient way for discussing more detailed death scenes.

The third point is that this thesis concerns the analysis of deaths in context, and primarily relies upon observing patterns as the narrative progresses. For this reason, the few fragments of the fifth book of the *Annales* will not be treated. Nor will the eleventh book or the emperor Claudius. Presumably, deaths during Claudius' principate also would have shown the emperor's development, but in the absence of any beginning with which to compare later episodes, it is impossible to say. I will, however, discuss the twelfth book of the history, but with a focus on Nero and his mother Agrippina, not the aging Claudius.

Finally, in general, I have directed more effort to the passages that have attracted less scholarly attention. Thus, sections such as the one describing the execution of Clutorius Priscus (3.49-3.51) may at first seem to have been examined with a surprising level of detail, but I believe that my analyses will show why such detail was warranted. At the same time, less space has been given to the scenes that have been studied in greater depth, such as the deaths of Agrippa Postumus, Agrippina the Younger, or Seneca. These scenes have not, of course, been disregarded, but I have limited my discussion of them to structural elements, while avoiding the historical and thematic concerns. I have, however, cited various other scholars who wrote about such elements, and the interested reader can find additional information in the footnotes.

I have been able to find no comprehensive study of deaths in Tacitus' *Annales*, and as a result, this thesis appears to be entering relatively uncharted territory. A number of scholars, however, have written on individual deaths or groups of deaths, and much of

the research for my project comes from those writers. Perhaps foremost among them was Sir Ronald Syme, whose article titled “Obituaries in Tacitus” (1958, later republished in Ash’s *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Tacitus*, 2012), provides perhaps the closest parallel to this thesis, albeit with a more limited scope. I have also made use of Syme’s *Tacitus: Volume 1* (1958) for general elements of the historian’s style and methodology. Roughly contemporary with Syme was R. H. Martin, whose “Tacitus and the Death of Augustus” (1955) explored the similarities between the death of this *princeps* and that of Claudius. About ten years later, Ramsay MacMullen’s *Enemies of the Roman Order: Treason, Unrest, and Alienation in the Empire* (1966) examined types of figures that frequently stood in opposition to the Roman emperors, a topic that included some discussion of death scenes in Tacitus and other ancient historians. Considerable attention was also given to Agrippa Postumus during the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, a concise summary of which can be found in Detweiler’s “Historical Perspectives on the Death of Agrippa Postumus” (1970). The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a number of articles by D. C. A. Shotter which examined various treason trials that occurred under Tiberius, working from a legal standpoint and displaying noticeable favor towards the emperor. These have been cited where appropriate. Not much later, Percival wrote his “Tacitus and the Principate” (1980) which attempted to define the historian’s relationship with his subject matter.

The 1990s saw further scholarship interested in analyzing death scenes in the *Annales*. At the beginning of the decade, Sinclair’s article “Tacitus’ Presentation of Livia Julia, Wife of Tiberius’ Son Drusus” explored this character, discussing her role in her husband’s murder. In 1993, Christopher Pelling published his “Tacitus and Germanicus,”



(later reprinted in 2014), which sought to reconsider how modern readers should view the prince. P. L. Corrigan analyzed the historian's presentation of Titius Sabinus' killing in that same year. In 1999, Elizabeth Keitel's "The Non-Appearance of the Phoenix at Tacitus 'Annals' 6.28" added valuable scholarship to the sixth book of the *Annales*, which prior to that point had seen little attention.

There was continued interest in the *Annales* during the 2000's and much of the bibliography for this thesis is from this period. A. J. Woodman's English translation of the *Annales* with attached notes (2004) was a valuable resource when planning this project. Two years later, Woodman also published "Tiberius and the Taste of Power: The Year 33 in Tacitus," which sought to find the organizing principle underlying the deaths in this year. Francesca Santoro L'Hoir's *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales* (2006) provided some discussion of deaths in the *Annales*, although her analysis was primarily limited to members of the imperial family. Of particular help in this project was Paul Murgatroyd's "Tacitus on the Death of Octavia" (2008), which provided the inspiration for the tricolon of deaths discussed in the third chapter of this work. At the end of the decade, *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus* (2009) was published, including relevant chapters written by Christina Kraus and Elizabeth Keitel. In the same year, Andrew Feldherr analyzed the death of Drusus from a historiographical perspective.

More recent scholarship has often approached the *Annales* from more theoretical and intertextual frameworks, such as Haynes' 2010 article, which provided valuable analysis of the traditionally neglected sixteenth book. 2014 saw the publication of *Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition*, which included a number of essays concerning the

historian, one of which, written by Woodman, treated the narrative of the Pisonian conspiracy. S. Bhatt's "Tacitus' Percennius and Democratic Historiography" (2016) studied the legionary rebellions in Germany based off of the work of Jacques Ranciere, and E. Cowan's "Contesting Clementia: the Rhetoric of Severitas in Tiberian Rome before and after the Trial of Clutorius Priscus" (2016) compared Velleius Paterculus' writings to Tacitus' in regard to this execution. In conclusion, while there is no exact precedent for this thesis, there are a number of books and articles of use for it, and the work of other scholars has been of great help in developing my analysis.

The thesis is divided into five chapters, organized chronologically through the *Annales*. The first examines the first three books of the history, arguing that the deaths in this section point to a corruption underlying the principate and contradicting Tiberius' efforts to present himself as a just ruler. This corruption is at first relatively mild, but grows in intensity over these books. The second chapter takes a more narrow focus, examining three of Sejanus' targets in the fourth book of the *Annales*, and arguing that these men serve as metaphors for the breakdown of morality, law, and religious piety under Tiberius' rule. The third treats the sixth book, arguing that it is not the baroque list of murders that it at first seems to be, but rather presents a carefully arranged sequence of deaths that build to the ridiculous trial of Vibulenus Agrippa. At the same time, the historian also uses a series of deaths in the middle of this book to present Macro as a new Sejanus, and to paint a bleak portrait of Rome's future. In the fourth chapter, I begin with book twelve and proceed to the beginning of the Pisonian conspiracy near the end of the fifteenth book. I argue that these deaths trace the shifts in the balance of power between Nero and Agrippina, and highlight the young emperor's progression from a bumbling

murderer to a skilled plotter. Finally, the last chapter analyzes the death of Seneca and the fragments of the sixteenth book of the *Annales*, arguing that these periods represent a new depth of cruelty for Nero, and showcase a Roman elite increasingly unable to resist his fury. Throughout these chapters, I continuously return to the two main arguments outlined above, namely that deaths mark key points of transition and showcase the principate's descent into greater tyranny. In the process, deaths come to constitute a vital part of Tacitus' history, forming the fatal framework on which the *Annales* are built.

## Chapter 1: The Gilded Books: Books 1-3 of Tacitus' *Annales*

The fourth book of Tacitus' *Annales* opens with the ominous declaration that after the first eight years of Tiberius' reign had passed with the state at peace, "fortune suddenly began to throw things into confusion" (*repente turbare fortuna coepit*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.1.1),<sup>5</sup> with the praetorian prefect Aelius Sejanus instigating this change. The implication of such a statement seems clear: the first three books of the *Annales* describe a period of calm and successful rule, while the next three show the *princeps*' transformation into a bloodthirsty tyrant, and many scholars have justifiably divided the first hexad in this manner.<sup>6</sup> But while the first three books certainly do include their share of positive material, including the successful campaigns of Germanicus and a generally good relationship between emperor and senate, Tiberius' descent into despotism is not nearly as sudden as the opening to the fourth book makes it seem. Throughout the first half of the Tiberian hexad, Tacitus carefully utilizes the deaths of prominent individuals in order to create a subtle counter narrative, showing that the problems of both *princeps* and principate which ultimately exploded into violence towards the conclusion of Tiberius' rule had been present from its very beginning. In this chapter, I will analyze a number of these deaths, and argue that they depict the first eight years of Tiberius' reign as a gilded age: beautiful on the outside, but with a hidden, ugly interior that gradually builds in strength as the narrative continues.

While the historian mentions or alludes to various deaths in the opening chapters of his work, the first that he recounts in detail is that of Paullus Fabius Maximus. Fabius

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<sup>5</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Syme 1958, 255 or Benario 2012, 111.

had supposedly accompanied Augustus on the emperor's journey to reconcile with his grandson Agrippa Postumus, and, after describing the trip to his wife, died under mysterious circumstances (Tac. *Ann.* 5.1-2). It is tempting to dismiss Fabius as a character of little importance, who only serves as a prop to add intrigue to the events surrounding the end of Augustus' life. Tacitus, however, presumably would have been aware that writing Fabius' death as the first to be treated fully would naturally emphasize it, and likely would have wanted to avoid giving this elevated status to a trivial passage. As a result, it is reasonable to conclude that there must be some significance to this episode besides merely adding color to Tiberius' accession.

This significance perhaps lies in the way that this death foreshadows two of the motifs that will occur throughout the *Annales*. Specifically, the uncertainty over whether the deceased chose to kill himself and the notion of a wife destroying her husband will reappear several times in the work.<sup>7</sup> This foreshadowing is more than a simple literary device to build tension, as it allows the historian to fit Augustus' reign succinctly into his constructed paradigm of a principate that, while always corrupt, became steadily more so. Tacitus is careful to present Augustus as entirely responsible for Fabius' murder, placing it just before the "first crime of the new principate" (*primum facinus novi principatus*: Tac. *Ann.* 1.6.1) and thus clearing Tiberius of any blame. Furthermore, as Francis Goodyear notes, the historian's comment that Augustus knew of Fabius' decision to tell his wife about the meeting seems designed to suggest the *princeps* brought about his

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<sup>7</sup> For examples of the former, see the deaths of Piso (Tac. *Ann.* 3.16.1), Asinius Gallus (6.23.1) and Agrippina the Elder (6.25.1). For examples of the latter, see the deaths of Drusus (4.3.3), Claudius (12.66.1-2), and the implication that Augustus himself was poisoned by Livia (1.5.1). Piso's death is a particularly clear parallel for this scene, as it contains the phrase *morte quaesitam*, closely resembling the *quaesita morte* used to describe Maximus' possible suicide. Notably, both deaths involve the emperor murdering a man who might have revealed compromising information.

death.<sup>8</sup> In firmly attributing this killing, which presages so many murders in the rest of the *Annales*, to Augustus, Tacitus subtly attacks the emperor's reign. Clearly, the fatal palace intrigues and suspicious murders that would plague the courts of the other Julio-Claudians did not begin after Augustus. On the contrary, they had always hidden beneath the principate, leaving a foundation that Tiberius and his successors would exacerbate considerably.

Once Tiberius is on the throne, he, or perhaps his mother, wastes no time in murdering his potential rival Agrippa Postumus. Much has been written about this scene, usually concerning who ordered the murder<sup>9</sup> and its similarities with the death of Junius Silanus (Tac. *Ann.* 13.1.1),<sup>10</sup> so little need be said about these matters here. There is, however, one feature of this chapter that is of particular interest, specifically the author's use of this death to demarcate the reigns of Tiberius and Augustus. The murder occurs immediately after the announcement that Tiberius has become the new emperor, and Tacitus' insistence that Augustus was not involved (Tac. *Ann.* 1.6.2) serves to separate this chapter from those describing Augustus' life. The term *facinus* further enhances the effect, as, in addition to its more common meaning of "crime," this word can also mean "deed,"<sup>11</sup> implying that Agrippa Postumus' murder was not merely the first wrong to occur during Tiberius' principate, but the first significant event to occur at all. Jane Bellemore has observed that Tacitus appears to have rearranged the chronology

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<sup>8</sup> Goodyear 1972, 132.

<sup>9</sup> See, Detweiler 1970 for a summary of the various theories, as well as Bellemore 2000 for a more recent hypothesis about this question.

<sup>10</sup> See page 76 of this thesis for a discussion of Silanus' death.

<sup>11</sup> A. J. Woodman in fact opted to use this meaning when translating the *Annales* (Woodman 2004, 4). Personally, "crime" seems to fit the historian's negative interpretation of this episode better, but the fact that modern readers can recognize the potential double meaning of the word suggests that ancient readers would have been able to do so.

surrounding this death,<sup>12</sup> and thus, the fact that it inaugurates Tiberius' reign should be considered a deliberate choice on Tacitus' part, not a simple deferral to the historical timeline. Presumably, one of the reasons for this choice is that it presents Tiberius in a negative fashion from the very beginning of the work, but structural concerns also likely motivated the historian. Acting as a border between Augustus and Tiberius, the murder sets a precedent for the use of deaths to mark key points of transition within the narrative. In the process, it provides the first explicit evidence that death scenes have structural value within the *Annales*, and encourages a reader to search for future uses of this technique.

The elimination of Agrippa Postumus does not, however, grant Tiberius an easy ascension, as legions revolting in Pannonia present the first major challenge for the new *princeps*. Tacitus names two men in particular, Percennius and Vibulenus, as leaders of the rebellion, both of whom inflame the soldiers with passionate speeches. Although the complaints that Percennius relates seem reasonable and the historian's depiction of the rebellion is perhaps not as negative as it might have been,<sup>13</sup> he undeniably presents each man as a danger to the state. Percennius, for example, is immediately identified as a "former leader of theater workers" (*dux olim theatralium operarum*) who "was taught how to stir up crowds with an actor's zeal" (*miscere coetus histrionali studio doctus*: Tac. *Ann.* 1.17.1). L'Hoir argues that Tacitus portrays the theater as a continual source of disruption,<sup>14</sup> and thus, drawing attention to Percennius' thespian background casts him as an inherently troublesome figure. In addition, Tacitus' elite audience presumably would

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<sup>12</sup> Bellemore 200, 100-101.

<sup>13</sup> Bhatt 2016, 167.

<sup>14</sup> L'Hoir 2006, 231-232

have viewed anyone who knew how to *miscere coetus* as dangerously hearkening back to the charismatic strongmen of the late republic, and the word *coetus* itself seems to have had revolutionary undertones in the *Annales*.<sup>15</sup> Vibulenus is no better. He blatantly lies to agitate the soldiery, and through his histrionic weeping and begging he “roused so much disorder and ill-will that as a result” (*tantum consternationis invidiaeque concivit ut pars [...]*: Tac. *Ann.* 1.23.1) some of the troops bound their commander’s bodyguards and attendants. In employing this result clause, Tacitus makes it clear that Vibulenus is directly responsible for the soldiers’ threatening actions. Thus, regardless of whether the reasons for the mutiny are reasonable or not, Percennius and Vibulenus are dangerous, destabilizing forces who seem to be the very embodiments of insubordination.

As the rebellion continues to grow, Tiberius dispatches his son Drusus to quell it. As part of his efforts to do so, the prince executes Percennius and Vibulenus, along with other unnamed ringleaders of the revolt (Tac. *Ann.* 1.29.4-1.30.1). This measure seems effective, as the legions, hindered by violent storms and afraid after a recent eclipse, cease rebelling and return peacefully to their winter quarters (Tac. *Ann.* 1.30.2-4). While the historian does not explicitly name the executions as a cause, their position immediately before the rebellion subsides and his comment that the early winter “increased”<sup>16</sup> (*auxerat*: Tac. *Ann.* 1.30.2) the soldiers’ concerns indicate that they left a significant impression on the rebels. In attributing the end of the revolt to this action, Tacitus shows that in the early part of Tiberius’ reign, executions were a legitimate way

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the historian’s note that *coetus* were celebrating the false Agrippa Postumus’ arrival in Rome (2.40.1) how Sacrovir and Florus stirred up rebels throughout the *coetus* (3.40.3), how Sejanus convinced Tiberius to leave Rome so that he could keep his power by having *coetus* at his house (4.41.1), and finally how one of the steps Seneca took to avoid raising Nero’s suspicions was to prevent *coetus* from coming to greet him (14.57.3).

<sup>16</sup> As opposed to a word like *efficere*, which would imply that the early winter was the sole reason for their concern.



of restoring order and eliminating potentially dangerous individuals. Tiberius does, admittedly, engage in unofficial murders, but for the moment, officially sanctioned deaths are a sign of good governance, not misrule. As such, the deaths of Vibulenus and Percennius provide a starting point with which a reader can compare later passages, and subsequent executions for illegitimate purposes must represent a moral decline in the emperor's rule.

The last named Roman to die in the first book of the history is Sempronius Gracchus, a former paramour of Tiberius' disgraced ex-wife Julia. His death is particularly noteworthy in that it may be said to be the first *exitus* in the *Annales*.<sup>17</sup> Such an extended description of this moment would naturally draw attention to it, so Gracchus' murder seems like an odd choice for this distinction. After all, the "perversely eloquent" (*prave facundus*: Tac. *Ann.* 1.53.3) adulterer is hardly a heroic victim of imperial tyranny like Valerius Asiaticus.<sup>18</sup> He does die bravely, much to the author's apparent surprise (Tac. *Ann.* 1.53.5), but it seems unlikely that he would have elaborated on the death simply to record this detail, especially since the overall depiction of the man is definitively negative. Nor is Gracchus a significant character from a historical standpoint. His only substantial connection to the principate is through Julia, who held no real power by this time, and ancient readers presumably would not have been especially interested in his fate if Tacitus had not mentioned it.

With this in mind, the historian likely decided to emphasize Gracchus' death for literary purposes, in that it informs the reader about Tiberius' character. As Tacitus tells it, the emperor chose to murder Gracchus solely because he held a grudge against the

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<sup>17</sup> See page 4 of this thesis for a definition of this term.

<sup>18</sup> See the first page of this thesis for the account of Asiaticus' death.

man for a years-old offence (Tac. *Ann.* 1.53.3). Reasonably speaking, the victim cannot possibly have represented a threat to the *princeps*, as he had been in exile for over a decade by this point and any hope of power that he might have held had died with Julia. But evidently Tiberius was not interested in reason, as he was willing to risk infamy out of pure resentment. The murder thus presents Tiberius as irrationally vindictive, exposing the calm and humble mask he wears in the senate as a lie. It is clear, then, why Sempronius Gracchus receives the *Annales*' first *exitus*. The scene's drawn-out nature forces the reader to dwell upon this unflattering facet of Tiberius' character, and Gracchus' composed acceptance of his fate further emphasizes the emperor's petty fury through striking contrast. It is important to note, however, that Tiberius' actions are not as wicked as they potentially could be. He avoids using official decrees of the senate to carry out the murder, and his efforts to shift the blame onto Lucius Asprenas (Tac. *Ann.* 1.53.6) suggest that he was not yet willing to embrace open tyranny. With this in mind, Gracchus' death plays two key roles in the narrative. On the one hand, it shows that a dark current lies beneath the principate, and easily shatters the image of a fair ruler that Tiberius attempted to cultivate. But on the other hand, it leaves plenty of room for this current to grow, as the emperor abstains from outright depravity. Thus, as the first book of the *Annales* comes to a close, the reader is left with a feeling of unease. The situation in Rome is far from despotism, but the emperor has already begun to show alarming tendencies.

Following a long interlude primarily describing Germanicus' wars in the north, citizen deaths resume with the trial and subsequent suicide of Scribonius Libo Drusus.

This event will be discussed in more depth later,<sup>19</sup> but for this chapter it will be sufficient to summarize its important features and to discuss its overall structural significance. The historian begins his account by stating that he will describe this scene in particular detail “because then first the things which consumed the state for so many years were invented” (*quia tum primum reperta sunt quae per tot annos rem publicam exedere*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.27.1).<sup>20</sup> Naturally, this comment predisposes a reader to examine the trial more closely, and creates the expectation that it will provide a template for future *maiestas* accusations. The report begins in earnest when one of Libo’s friends encourages him to engage in a number of unsavory activities, including the “rites of wizards” (*magorum sacra*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.27.2), so that he can report the man to Tiberius and gain the emperor’s favor. Another senator, Fulcinius Trio, brings the matter before the senate. (Tac. *Ann.* 2.28.1-3). Tacitus presents most of the charges against Libo as ridiculous, but he does note that the prosecution claimed the defendant had written a document containing occult symbols next to the names of Tiberius and other senators (Tac. *Ann.* 2.30.2). The accused then pleads with a stoic Tiberius and commits suicide in desperation, prompting the emperor to swear that he would have spared Libo if he had not killed himself. (Tac. *Ann.* 2.31.1-3). Finally, the deceased’s property is distributed to his accusers, and the senate declares the day of the suicide a holiday (Tac. *Ann.* 2.32.1-2).

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<sup>19</sup> See page 60 of this thesis for that discussion.

<sup>20</sup> There is some uncertainty over precisely what Tacitus meant with this comment. Goodyear repeats Furneaux’s theory that the historian did not mean delation in general, which had already occurred with the trial of Granus Marcellus (Tac. *Ann.* 1.74.1-6), but rather the practice of intimate friends informing on each other (Goodyear 1981, 265). Shotter advocates a slightly different view, arguing that the historian saw the fact that the *delatores* were rewarded as the factor that made this trial problematic (Shotter 1972, 97). Ultimately, however, the historian’s exact meaning is unimportant for this project, and it is enough to say that he clearly intended this trial to be programmatic.

From a narrative standpoint, Libo's trial builds upon Gracchus' murder, showing that Tiberius' reign has continued to become more corrupt, but is not yet entirely despotic. Clearly, the idea that an individual hoped to win favor with the emperor by entrapping his friend reflects poorly on Tiberius, and the senate's fawning and flattery once the trial concludes hardly inspires confidence in the body's independence. And yet, Libo, like Gracchus, is not an innocent martyr. Tacitus may portray the man as an unwitting dupe, but his guilt is never in question. For example, the historian reports that Libo's friend "drove" (*impulit*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.27.2) the senator to crime, implying that even if Libo was manipulated, he did participate in unlawful activity. In addition, as Shotter notes, if Tacitus had truly wanted to make the accused appear innocent, then he presumably would not have mentioned the document with the names of senators, as a Roman audience would have viewed this as evidence of a serious crime.<sup>21</sup> Tiberius' oath also warrants examination. Tacitus explicitly mentions when Tiberius is lying throughout the first hexad,<sup>22</sup> so the fact that he does not here suggests that the *princeps*' pledge should be considered genuine. With all of these factors in mind, Libo's trial serves to mark the continuing degradation of Tiberius' rule. The emperor still maintains some level of self-control, as he has not progressed to the point of killing innocent victims and seems inclined to spare the accused. However, the sinister *delatores* are gaining strength, Tiberius increasingly turns to his authoritarian impulses, and the conditions that will lead to later slaughters are beginning to fall into place.

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<sup>21</sup> Shotter 1972, 92.

<sup>22</sup> See for example, Tacitus' comment that Tiberius *simulabat* that Augustus ordered the death of Agrippa Postumus (1.6.1) or that Germanicus understood that the supposed reasons for his second consulship were *fingi* by Tiberius (2.26.5).

Whatever mercy the emperor might have felt inclined to show Scribonius Libo Drusus is soon counterbalanced by his vengeful attitude towards the Cappadocian king Archelaus. The *princeps*, who had long hated this ruler because he “had honored Tiberius with no attendance when he was living on Rhodes” (*eum Rhodi agentem nullo officio coluisset*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.42.2), tricks Archelaus into coming to Rome, where the old man is tried by the senate and subsequently dies as a result of “mental distress” (*angore*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.42.3). Tacitus’ description of this event seems designed to paint Tiberius in the worst light possible, as he comments that Archelaus did not scorn the future emperor out of arrogance, but because he was advised to do so by friends of Augustus (Tac. *Ann.* 2.42.2). Furthermore, Goodyear observes that Tiberius had defended the king before Augustus, and thus, Archelaus was indebted to him.<sup>23</sup> The omission of this information makes the emperor’s motives seem particularly petty, as he appears to have had no reason to expect deference from Archelaus beyond an inflated sense of self-importance. These two features cast the Cappadocian as another Sempronius Gracchus, killed merely to appease Tiberius’ long-lasting and irrational spite. This time, however, the *princeps*’ actions are even more reprehensible. Before, the emperor used his own soldiers to murder Gracchus and evidently felt enough shame that he tried to hide his guilt (Tac. *Ann.* 1.53.5-6). Now, however, he openly attacks the king without restraint and co-opts the senate, supposedly Rome’s chief governing body, to carry out his trivial vengeance. Archelaus’ trial thus demonstrates Tiberius’ continuing descent into despotism, as he blatantly makes the senate a tool for the crimes he once concealed.

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<sup>23</sup> Goodyear 1981, 320, working from Suet. *Tib.* 8 and Dio 57.7.3.

The context in which this scene appears further reflects poorly on Tiberius. Immediately before describing the emperor's hatred for the king, Tacitus recounts the triumph awarded to Germanicus for his numerous victories in battle (Tac. *Ann.* 2.41.2-3). Right after Archelaus' death, he reports that Germanicus was appointed to fix disturbances in the eastern provinces (Tac. *Ann.* 2.42.5-2.43.1). The placement of this foolish trial between two elements of Germanicus' foreign policy creates a striking contrast between Tiberius and his adopted son. While the prince is winning foreign wars and addressing concerns at the corners of the empire, Tiberius is wielding the state's governing body to bully an old man and satisfy his personal grievances. In this context, the episode further peels away the emperor's veneer of good governance, revealing that he is unconcerned with showing good leadership at home or abroad. Although he supposedly ascribes great importance to the senate in public, and he may indeed have felt that way at some point, by this time in his reign he views it as little more than a tool to use for his own personal pleasure.

Germanicus, of course, never returns from his mission, and his death in Syria occupies a large portion of the text towards the end of the second book. The significance of this death, as well as that of the prince's rival Cnaeus Piso, will be discussed in more detail in the second chapter, but first, one point about his passing must be made. Specifically, the question of who, if anyone, killed Germanicus demands an answer.<sup>24</sup> Tacitus' Germanicus seems to have no doubt, asserting on his deathbed "now I [have been] carried off by the crime of Piso and [his wife] Plancina." (*nunc scelere Pisonis et Plancinae interceptus*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.71.1). Modern scholars, however, have been less

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<sup>24</sup> Obviously, the culprit (if there was one) behind the murder of the historical Germanicus cannot be determined, nor is it relevant for this argument. Here, it is enough to say whom the historian presents as responsible.

sure. Goodyear observes that Tacitus refers to the condition ailing Germanicus as an “illness” (*morbi*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.69.3), not poison.<sup>25</sup> Pelling agrees, noting that the author carefully separates Germanicus’ belief that he was poisoned from the historical narrative, although Pelling also admits that Tacitus does not portray the prince’s comments as mad ramblings.<sup>26</sup> Both writers make compelling points, and it seems clear that Tacitus does not want to imply that Piso poisoned Germanicus.

This does not mean, however, that Piso had no hand in the young man’s demise. Tacitus reports that as Germanicus struggled with his illness, a number of sinister devices including lead tablets with his name on them, magical spells, and remains of corpses were found at an unspecified location (Tac. *Ann.* 2.69.3). Notably, the historian does not cast doubt on the truth of this story. The verb used to describe the discovery, *reperiebantur*, is in the indicative mood and is not qualified in any way, nor does the author add a phrase like *fama fuit*<sup>27</sup> that might prompt a reader to question whether such evidence existed. While Tacitus does not say explicitly that Piso was the one responsible for these charms, the word *Pisone* occurs both immediately before and immediately after the lines describing their uncovering (Tac. *Ann.* 2.69.3). Such an arrangement hardly seems accidental, and suggests that the historian wanted his readers to believe that Piso used magic in order to harm Germanicus.

As humorous as the notion of a respectable man attempting to destroy a rival through the dark arts seems today, the magical attacks on Germanicus would not have appeared trivial to a Roman reader. Literary and material evidence suggests that belief in

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<sup>25</sup> Goodyear 1981, 409.

<sup>26</sup> Pelling 2014, 65-66.

<sup>27</sup> Compare, for example, Tac. *Ann.* 15.65.1, where the historian uses this phrase to cast doubt on Seneca’s participation in the Pisonian conspiracy.

the supernatural was high in the ancient world,<sup>28</sup> and the *Annales* seem to vouch for the potency of mysticism. Specifically, in the sixth book, the historian reports that Tiberius would lead astrologers up a cliff, and, if he suspected that the astrologer was a fraud, would have a slave throw the man to his death. Tacitus mentions one particular individual, Thrasyllus, who was able to realize that he was in danger through his clairvoyance, and thus earned Tiberius' trust (Tac. *Ann.* 6.21.1-3). The historian does not appear to doubt the validity of this story, and so he (or the Tacitean narrator, at any rate) evidently believed that astrology was not merely trickery.

One could, admittedly, make the argument that this belief only extended to astrology and not to magic, but the two concepts are tightly linked in the *Annales*. After Scribonius Libo Drusus commits suicide, Tacitus records that the senate made a decree “concerning the expulsion of astrologers and wizards from Italy” (*de mathematicis magisque Italia pellendis*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.32.3). Apparently, the *patres* saw little difference between the two groups, indicating that magic enjoys the same credibility within the text as astrology does.<sup>29</sup> With this in mind, Piso's role in Germanicus' death becomes much more sinister. He does not seem to have poisoned Germanicus, but the historian implies that he attacked the prince through the dark arts, a method that was at least equally effective. Whatever may have happened to the real Germanicus, it is clear that Tacitus chose to present Piso as responsible for the man's death. This choice will have a

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<sup>28</sup> For a discussion about Roman belief in magic, especially during the imperial period, see MacMullen 1966, 102-107. Also see Moretti 2015, 105-107 for a discussion on material evidence for ancient beliefs in magic. Apuleius' *Apologia* notably includes the comment that certain magical practices were forbidden by the twelve tables (Apul. *Apol.* 47.3), indicating that they were seen as effective enough to be dangerous. For an ancient opposing viewpoint, see Plin. *Nat.* 30.5-30.7, in which the author strongly asserts that magic is trickery. The fact that he felt a need to do so, however, perhaps suggests widespread belief in magic.

<sup>29</sup> In fairness, Ripat has argued that these expulsions were motivated by the tendency of astrologers to spur popular dissatisfaction with the emperor, not necessarily because astrology was viewed as effective (2011, 141-142). Her argument seems reasonable from a historical standpoint, but this does not appear to be the senate's rationale within the *Annales* themselves.



significant impact on the analysis of Drusus' death, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

For the first two books of the *Annales*, Tiberius' reign has possessed a dual nature. On the surface, the *princeps* manages the empire well, largely cooperating with the senate and refraining from any official murders. But a dark undercurrent runs beneath this period, encompassing hidden killings, the growing influence of sinister *delatores*, and signs of future tyranny. This current leaves the reader in a constant state of anticipation as to when the corruption will finally burst onto the surface. The waiting comes to an end at the close of the year 21 C.E., as Clutorius Priscus<sup>30</sup> is placed on trial and executed by the senate. Allegedly, the *eques* had written a poem eulogizing Tiberius' still living son Drusus, and had read it aloud at a social gathering (Tac. *Ann.* 3.49.1-2). The senate condemns him to death for this offence, but Marcus Lepidus makes an extended speech in *oratio recta* arguing that they should only exile the man, not kill him (Tac. *Ann.* 3.50.1-4). His words move only one senator, and the execution continues as planned. Tiberius gently scolds the senate for its decision, but takes no real action (Tac. *Ann.* 3.51.1-2). At first, this trial may seem insignificant, as the emperor plays little role in it and Priscus is not an important figure in imperial politics. But the trial is not insignificant. On the contrary, the historian presents it as the pinnacle of the structural process that has occurred throughout the first three books of the *Annales*, whereby character deaths demonstrate that Rome's government has grown increasingly wicked as Tiberius' reign becomes more entrenched. In order to create this effect, Tacitus draws

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<sup>30</sup> Some scholars have argued that the Clutorius Priscus that appears in the manuscripts should in fact be read as C(aius) Lutorius Priscus (see for example, Alfred John Church's translation). I follow Woodman and Martin 1996 in using the name Clutorius Priscus, but in any case, the man's name is irrelevant for our argument.

attention to four ways in which it differs from earlier proceedings, each of which will be discussed below. These four differences present the trial as far worse than the murders that came before it, providing clear evidence that the emperor's rule is degrading.

The first sign that Priscus' trial is problematic is the falsity of the charges leveled against him. Tacitus states that the witnesses who spoke against the defendant did so because they were "frightened into giving testimony" (*ceteris ad dicendum testimonium exterritis*: Tac. *Ann.* 3.49.2), casting doubt on the validity of their claims. Furthermore, he directs the reader's attention to Vitia, who despite her presence at the party where Priscus allegedly read his poem, "asserted strongly that she heard nothing" (*nihil se audivisse adseveravit*: Tac. *Ann.* 3.49.2). The fact that the historian mentioned this evidence at all is reason to believe that the charges were false, as he presumably would have omitted it if he wanted to portray the accusation as truthful. As mentioned above, the historian presents Scribonius Libo Drusus, the only other character to have been convicted on a charge of *maiestas* at this point in the narrative, as unambiguously guilty, and thus the conviction of the innocent Priscus represents a significant change in the justice system. Clearly, conditions have deteriorated considerably between the two trials. Whether the defendant is guilty or not no longer matters, as the senate scrambles to produce whatever verdict it thinks will please the *princeps* the most.

Priscus' trial also includes a more direct reference to Libo's. While arguing for a reduced sentence, Lepidus comments that Tiberius often complained when an individual on trial committed suicide before he could offer mercy (Tac. *Ann.* 3.50.2). Although *saepe* implies that the emperor made such complaints repeatedly, he only does so once in

the surviving *Annales*: immediately after Libo's suicide.<sup>31</sup> The senator's words thus prompt a reader to recall Tiberius' oath that he would have spared Libo's life, even though that defendant had been convicted of "attempting a revolution" (*moliri res novas*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.27.1). In reminding the reader of this oath, Tacitus makes Priscus' execution seem utterly absurd, as no reasonable person would consider reading a tasteless poem to be worse than plotting to overthrow the emperor. But the senate is not reasonable, and it is uninterested in whether Priscus' crime was serious enough to warrant an execution. The body's lack of concern further points to the declining state of the justice system, as discretion evidently no longer has a place in the courtroom.

The fact that Priscus is dispatched through an official execution represents another departure from earlier proceedings. While several individuals died in the first three books of the *Annales*, almost all of them either perished from natural causes, committed suicide, or were secretly murdered. In fact, the only named characters to have received public executions were Vibulenus and Percennius, as well as two astrologers (Tac. *Ann.* 2.32.3) who were presumably a part of Libo's attempted conspiracy.<sup>32,33</sup> The difference between these figures and Priscus could not be more pronounced. On the one side, there are dangerous men who attempted to spur rebellions against the emperor and undermine Tiberius' rule, and on the other, there is a foolish but harmless poet. The senate's decision to execute Priscus formally demonstrates that the role of public

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<sup>31</sup> Woodman and Martin 1996, 369.

<sup>32</sup> Almost nothing is known about these astrologers, but I agree with Goodyear (1981, 285) in arguing that they must have been deeply connected with Libo's plot, as otherwise there is little reason why they alone should have been executed.

<sup>33</sup> I have chosen not to include Clemens, the slave impersonating Agrippa Postumus (see Tac. *Ann.* 2.40 for his death) in this list, as the historian states that Tiberius had him killed in secret. Even if one does count Clemens, however, my main point still stands, as Clemens was attempting to overthrow Tiberius, and thus undoubtedly was a danger to the state.

execution has changed for the worse over the first seven years of Tiberius' principate.

Initially, executions represented a legitimate way in which authority figures could remove dangerous individuals. Now, however, they are nothing more than a prop for opportunistic senators to gain favor with an increasingly violent emperor.

Finally, Tiberius' absence throughout this scene makes the growing sycophancy of the senate plain. Not only does his letter chastising the *patres* remind the reader that the emperor was not present for the trial, but the historian also seems to minimize his presence in these passages. Notably, the name Tiberius does not appear at all between the first mention of the charges against Priscus and the historian's comment that the defendant was executed (Tac. *Ann.* 3.49-50).<sup>34</sup> Instead, Tacitus employs the more generic terms *Caesare* and *principem*. The deliberate omission of the proper name Tiberius highlights the fact that the senate is not acting under any compulsion when it decides to give an innocent man the death penalty. This is not to say, however, that Tiberius bears no responsibility for Priscus' death. As Cowan notes, the emperor is also implicated, as he is responsible for creating a system of punishments in which the senate was not expected to show *clementia*.<sup>35</sup> Thus, both *princeps* and *patres* come together to bring about the execution of a man who at worst committed a minor offense. Just like at the trial of Archelaus, the senate acts to punish petty misdeeds on behalf of Tiberius. But there is one clear difference between these scenes. Before, Tiberius needed to wield the senate to obtain his vengeance. Now, he no longer even needs to, as the senate has made the emperor's corruption its own.

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<sup>34</sup> The omission of the proper name Tiberius for so long a stretch is more unusual than it may seem. Consider, for example, the fact that his name appears in the section immediately preceding this one, and the fact that it appears twice in the chapter after Priscus is killed. With this in mind, it seems reasonable to conclude that the author made a conscious effort to avoid calling Tiberius by his name.

<sup>35</sup> Cowan 2016, 95.

One final death occurs before the end of the third book of the *Annales*, namely that of Junia, the niece of Cato, husband of Cassius, and sister of Brutus. Unsurprisingly, republican motifs abound, and the deceased even refuses to mention Tiberius in her will (Tac. *Ann.* 3.76.1). As glorious as this presentation of the republic is, it is impossible to ignore the fact that this is a funeral. The implication seems clear. Figures from the end of the republic still enjoy prestige, but they are dying. As the years of Tiberius' rule pass, the individuals associated with the *libertas*<sup>36</sup> of Cato and Brutus gradually fade away, and the principate moves closer and closer to tyranny.

As the historian tells it, the first eight years of Tiberius' reign were a time of calm and good governance. Then, Sejanus appeared as though from thin air, and suddenly drove the emperor into depravity. Certainly, this is a convenient way for Tacitus to have divided the Tiberian hexad. It is also demonstrably wrong. Throughout the first three books of the *Annales*, Tacitus highlights a number of deaths in order to show that dark impulses hide in the shadows of the emperor's supposedly pure reign. These impulses are not only omnipresent, but they also steadily grow in power, eventually bursting to the surface during the ridiculous trial of Clutorius Priscus. In short, Sejanus may have spurred the emperor into tyranny faster, but the wicked praetorian prefect did not come from nowhere. He appeared because the conditions were right for him to appear, and it seems likely that if he had not pushed Tiberius to corruption, someone else would have emerged from the fetid environment on the Palatine to do so. Whatever he may say, Tacitus makes it clear that this environment did not emerge in 23 C.E. It dates at least as

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the association between Brutus, Cato, and *libertas* in the imperial period, see the first chapter of MacMullen 1966, pages 1-45.

far back as the end of Augustus' reign, and had always been lurking beneath the brilliant veneer of the gilded books.

## Chapter 2: *Persona non Grata*: Sejanus and the Fourth Book of Tacitus' *Annales*

While the historian's assertion that the first eight years of Tiberius' reign represent a period of calm and good governance seems questionable, Tacitus' portrayal of the rest of the emperor's rule as a time of chaos and tyranny seems unimpeachable. The wicked Sejanus seizes the fourth book of the *Annales* from the very beginning, hanging over it like a noxious cloud and spurring the impressionable Tiberius to embrace his darkest impulses. The transformation from *princeps* to *tyrannus* is not immediate, however, nor does it occur through a disorganized series of murders and *maiestas* trials. As in the first half of the hexad, Tacitus carefully arranges the deaths of prominent men in order to illustrate Tiberius' growing corruption and the senate's increasing sycophancy. In this chapter, I examine three of these deaths, namely those of Tiberius' son Drusus, Gaius Silius, and Titius Sabinus. I argue that these killings point to a rapidly developing breakdown in morality, the legal system, and religion — all pillars upon which Tiberius constructed his persona of a fair ruler operating under republican precedents. As these pillars collapse, Rome loses its ability to resist the *princeps*' despotic impulses, setting the stage for the bloodbath that the final years of Tiberius' reign will become.

Murder enters the fourth book of the *Annales* almost immediately, as Sejanus, swiftly gaining power, plots to remove Tiberius' potential heirs in an effort to win the throne for himself. The crafty praetorian prefect chooses the emperor's son Drusus as his first target (Tac. *Ann.* 4.3.2). In order to carry out his scheme, Sejanus seduces Drusus' wife Livia, divorcing his own spouse Apicata in the process (Tac. *Ann.* 4.3.3-5).

Following a brief period of hesitation, he decides that he must act quickly, and suborns a eunuch to give Drusus a poison with which “a chance illness could be imitated” (*fortuitus morbus adsimularetur*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.8.1). Tacitus presents the rest of Drusus’ life after the poisoning in vague terms, noting only that Tiberius behaved with his typical stoicism throughout his son’s supposed illness (Tac. *Ann.* 4.8.2). Once the prince has died, the emperor addresses the senate, giving a powerful speech that he ultimately ruins by adding obviously false comments about restoring republican governance (Tac. *Ann.* 4.8.3-4.9.2). Finally, Tacitus describes a popular rumor that Sejanus tricked Tiberius into poisoning his own son, but then rejects it in strong terms (Tac. *Ann.* 4.10.1-4.11.3).

Much like the death of Agrippa Postumus, Drusus’ death acquires structural significance through the fact that it explicitly marks a key point of transition within the narrative. Before describing Sejanus’ choice of poison, the historian provides a generally favorable account of Tiberius’ rule, noting that the *princeps* upheld good governance, albeit in a rather uncharismatic fashion (Tac. *Ann.* 4.6.1-4.7.1). He reports that Tiberius continued to perform good acts “until [his good acts] were overthrown by the death of Drusus” (*donec morte Drusi verterentur*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.7.1). Tacitus’ message could not be clearer. In employing an ablative of means, he establishes that Drusus’ murder was undoubtedly the cause of Tiberius’ turn towards worse behavior. This in turn presents the death as the fine line separating the good and bad periods of the emperor’s rule, just as Agrippa Postumus’ murder represented the fine line between the principates of Augustus and his successor. Drusus’ poisoning thus shows the historian’s continuing reliance upon this technique, and provides more overt evidence that deaths in the *Annales* serve structural purposes.



This particular scene also derives narrative importance through the ways in which it echoes and differs from the death of Drusus' brother Germanicus.<sup>37</sup> In order to make this point, I will first examine similarities between these sections and argue that Tacitus intends for the reader to recall Germanicus while reading about the end of Drusus. Then, I will point to two key differences between the accounts. Ultimately, I will argue that these differences present Drusus' murder as a corrupted reflection of Germanicus' death, showing an overall breakdown in morality and the justice system as the years of Tiberius' rule pass.

Tacitus pairs Germanicus and Drusus several times throughout the first two books of the *Annales*. Perhaps the most obvious example occurs shortly after Germanicus is dispatched to the east. As the historian describes how Tiberius' court was split between those who favored one prince or the other, he notes that the two "brothers were extraordinarily united" (*fratres egregie concordēs*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.43.7). Such a description strongly encourages a reader to connect the characters, as it indicates that they act with such harmony that even the palace intrigues of court life cannot separate them. Furthermore, Tiberius himself seems to link his two heirs, as the author makes clear during the revolts following the emperor's accession. Fearing that if he were to visit one of the revolting armies first, the other might be offended by the apparent slight (Tac. *Ann.* 1.47.2), the new *princeps* decides to send one of the brothers to each force. In describing Tiberius' concerns, the historian demonstrates that the emperor was keenly aware of the potential danger in dispatching a more prominent figure to one of the two armies. As a result, the fact that he would select Drusus and Germanicus as envoys shows that the two

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<sup>37</sup> Drusus and Germanicus were brothers by adoption, not blood, but since Tacitus himself uses the term *fratres* to describe them (see for example, 2.43.7), I use the word "brothers" in this thesis.

were seen as equal in status, and prompts the reader to equate them from an early point in the text. This connection between the princes naturally invites a comparison between their deaths, indicating that such a comparison will prove valuable.

Furthermore, Germanicus has a surprisingly large presence in this portion of the text considering that he died four years previously. The majority of Tiberius' speech to the senate concerns Germanicus' children, whom he first calls the *Germanici liberi* (Tac. *Ann.* 4.8.3) rather than by their proper names, Nero and Drusus.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the historian is careful to note that "the same things which were decreed for Germanicus were decreed for the memory of Drusus" (*memoriae Drusi eadem quae in Germanicum decernuntur*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.9.2). At first, it seems tempting to dismiss this comment as Tacitus' way to avoid unnecessarily repeating a long list of honors. This may have influenced the historian to an extent, but convenience was likely not the only factor motivating his decision. By declining to list the distinctions awarded to Drusus, Tacitus compels any curious reader to return to the chapters describing Germanicus' death. Returning to this section would then remind readers of the circumstances surrounding the end of that prince's life, and would help them see the similarities between the passages. Even Sejanus' poison, which was intended to mimic a *morbus*, seems to provide another verbal echo, recalling the *morbi* (Tac. *Ann.* 2.69.3) that ultimately killed Germanicus.<sup>39</sup> In short,

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<sup>38</sup> Tiberius does, admittedly, use the proper names towards the end of the speech, but there is no reason why he could not have used them twice, and thus the appearance of Germanicus' name should be regarded as significant.

<sup>39</sup> It is impossible to say exactly whether Tacitus would have created this echo deliberately, and I will admit that *morbus* is not a particularly unusual word. However, *morbus* only appears three times before this point in the narrative: once to describe Scribonius Libo Drusus' fake illness (2.29.2), once to describe the sickness that ailed Germanicus (2.69.3) and once as part of a metaphor in one of Tiberius' speeches. (3.54.1). Clearly then, the word is rare at this point in the narrative, and it seems reasonable to think that Tacitus may have chosen to use it in order to recall Germanicus' death.

the description of Drusus' poisoning alludes to the death of Germanicus both directly and indirectly, further suggesting that the two scenes should be read together.

Likewise, the historian chooses to describe both deaths through a similar lens. As Andrew Feldherr observes, Tacitus directs his attention almost exclusively to how various parties react to Drusus' killing, saying little about the event itself.<sup>40</sup> The death is in fact so minimized that there are only 15 words<sup>41</sup> between the end of the sentence describing the poisoning and the word indicating that Drusus has died, *defuncto* (Tac. *Ann.* 4.8.1-2). And while the description of Germanicus' end is more detailed and includes a lengthy speech in *oratio recta*, the author spends a considerable amount of time discussing how the populace received the news of his death. Specifically, Tacitus provides an extended description of the prince's funeral and the displaying of his body (Tac. *Ann.* 2.73-1-4), Agrippina's return to Rome with his ashes (2.75.1), the public's anxiety over his illness and distress upon hearing of his death (2.82.1-5), and the various honors bestowed upon the deceased (2.83.1-4). Thus, while Germanicus' death itself may fill more of the text than Drusus', the historian still seems primarily interested in reporting how different classes responded to it, adding yet another similarity between these episodes.

Finally, Drusus' death recalls that of Germanicus through its similar public interpretation. As Tiberius eulogizes his son before the rostra, the people make a show of sadness but secretly rejoice because "the house of Germanicus was growing strong again" (*domumque Germanici revirescere*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.12.1). This response appears to look back to the announcement immediately after Germanicus' death that Livia, the wife of

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<sup>40</sup> Feldherr 2009, 177-178.

<sup>41</sup> For this count, I have used the text printed in Furneaux 1896

Drusus, gave birth to twin sons.<sup>42</sup> Although Tiberius was elated at the news, the public grieved, as they feared that a stronger house of Drusus “would burden the house of Germanicus further” (*domum Germanici magis urgueret*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.84.2). The linguistic and thematic similarities are clear: in both cases, the populace puts on a masquerade to hide the fact that its only real concern is for the *domus Germanici*. It seems unlikely that this arrangement would be coincidental, and the comparable popular response provides one final piece of evidence to suggest that Drusus’ death is meant to remind the reader of Germanicus’.

Clearly, the scenes share numerous similarities, but why would Tacitus want to create such a parallel? The answer to this question perhaps lies in the ways that the deaths do not match, namely, in what happens to the perpetrator of each murder and the role of the victim’s wife. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the narrative suggests that Cnaeus Piso killed Germanicus with dark magic.<sup>43</sup> He is not able to celebrate this murder for long. After a failed effort to seize control of Syria (Tac. *Ann.* 2.76.1-2.81.3), Piso is forced to return to Rome, and his subsequent trial there occupies a large part of the beginning of the third book. While the attempted coup in the east certainly would constitute a serious crime, Tacitus presents Piso’s role in the killing of Germanicus as the sole impetus for his trial. For example, while the senator is making the journey to Rome, the hope of “seeking vengeance from Piso” (*petendae e Pisone ultionis*: Tac. *Ann.* 3.7.1) rouses the minds of all the citizens. Given that Piso’s effort to steal the province was entirely unsuccessful, the term *ultio* can only apply to the murder of Germanicus, and a

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<sup>42</sup> Admittedly, one could make the argument that this scene is not strictly related to Germanicus’ death, however, the historian’s comment that the births occurred “with the sorrow [of Germanicus’ death] still fresh” (*recenti adhuc maestitia*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.84.1) relates it rather tightly to the prince’s end.

<sup>43</sup> See pages 20-23 of this thesis.

word like *scelus* seems more fitting for the failed coup. In highlighting this point, Tacitus minimizes the force of Piso's insurrection and establishes that his baleful magic is the only cause of the people's wrath. Tiberius, too, seems keenly aware of why the defendant is on trial. Before the legal proceedings begin, the *princeps* addresses the senate, summarizing how it should conduct itself and the accounts on which Piso stands accused. Notably, the charge that Tiberius announces first, and the one that he discusses the most, is the accusation that Piso murdered Germanicus (Tac. *Ann.* 4.12.1-2). It is only after he concludes his discussion of this charge that he instructs the senate to "also consider this at the same time" (*simulque illud reputate*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.12.3) and briefly recounts Piso's efforts to corrupt the legions. The use of *simulque* as a conjunction subordinates the defendant's revolutionary activities and creates the impression that they are little more than an afterthought, an impression that the emperor's brevity only strengthens. In short, Piso's actions in Syria were almost certainly treasonous, but no one seems particularly concerned. The man did, however, attack the popular Germanicus, and for that he needed to be destroyed.

With this in mind, Piso's suicide and subsequent condemnation provide some degree of vengeance for the murdered prince. It is important to note that justice was not entirely served, as many complained that Livia intervened to acquit Piso's wife (Tac. *Ann.* 3.17.2) and Tiberius reduced many of the penalties imposed upon the condemned (Tac. *Ann.* 3.18.1). However, at its core, the trial was not a complete failure, as it managed to punish one of Germanicus' murderers, and the people's complaint implies that it would have punished the other if not for Livia's unpopular involvement.<sup>44</sup> Thus,

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<sup>44</sup> Tacitus does also raise the suggestion that Tiberius himself may have been complicit in Germanicus' death (Tac. *Ann.* 3.16.1), thus potentially adding another murderer who escapes justice. However, the

by the time of Germanicus' death, the legal system under Tiberius had begun to weaken, and some killers could escape penalties for their crimes. But the law had not been entirely subverted yet, and Germanicus' friends can still enjoy vengeance upon one of his killers.

Drusus is not so fortunate. Tiberius does not even seem to suspect Sejanus as the poisoner, although the historian reports that there was a "rumor of those same times" (*eorundem temporum rumore*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.10.1) implicating Sejanus. According to that gossip, Sejanus convinced Tiberius to poison his heir, and thus at least some people were aware of the praetorian prefect's role. Sejanus, however, is not put on trial. On the contrary, the details of the rumor seem to suggest that Sejanus completely fooled Tiberius, as the public evidently found it easier to believe that the emperor was complicit in the plot than that he could be so ignorant.<sup>45</sup> And even when Sejanus' role in the poisoning finally is uncovered eight years later, it is not because of any consideration for the victim. While attempting to refute the idea that Tiberius was involved in the killing, the author states that "the sequence of the crime was revealed through Sejanus' [ex-wife] Apicata" (*ordo alioqui sceleris per Apicatam Seiani proditus*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.11.2). Tacitus does not explain precisely why Apicata disclosed the details of the murder, but the fact

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historian seems to distance himself from this story, and his comment that he "ought not to conceal" (*occulere debui*) it suggests that he only included it because he felt an obligation to do so. Furthermore, Drogula provides a convincing argument for why it seems unlikely that Piso was acting at Tiberius' orders that need not be summarized here (Drogula 2015). In any event, even if Tiberius really did order Germanicus' killing, justice was still partially served in the condemnation of Piso.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Feldherr has argued that the rumors were created out of hatred for Sejanus and Tiberius, and also to construct a counter-narrative to counteract the official representation of the death (Feldherr 2009, 180-182). He argues this point convincingly, and this may be the source of these rumors, but even so, they must have had some degree of plausibility to have spread so widely, and thus they still likely point to the emperor's ignorance of Sejanus' plot.

that Sejanus “drove her from his house” (*pellit domo*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.3.5)<sup>46</sup> in order to advance his scheme suggests that she would have had a reason to bear ill will towards her former husband. Furthermore, if she had been intent on avenging Drusus, she presumably would have tried to expose the plot immediately, as more evidence would be available, rather than waiting eight years. Evidently, the state of the legal system has degraded between the murders of Germanicus and Drusus. The trial of Germanicus’ killers was not ideal, and only partial justice was delivered, but it *was* justice. By 23 C.E., however, Tiberius’ court has reached such a point of corruption that his own son can be murdered right under his nose. If the murderer receives any punishment, it is merely coincidental. The similarities between the two deaths serve to throw this difference into clear relief, leaving little doubt that Tiberius’ reign is decaying.

Equally striking is the contrast between how each victim’s wife behaves. As Germanicus’ illness consumes him, he gives Agrippina advice from his deathbed (Tac. *Ann.* 2.72.1), suggesting that she was attending to her ailing husband like a dutiful wife. Furthermore, the historian’s comment that Germanicus died shortly after speaking to her (Tac. *Ann.* 2.72.2) implies that this was the prince’s final act, and his conversation with Agrippina occupies a large portion of his *exitus*. In giving Agrippina such a pivotal role in Germanicus’ final moments, the historian emphasizes the strong partnership between husband and wife,<sup>47</sup> and brings Agrippina’s concern for her spouse and children to the

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<sup>46</sup> It is, admittedly, possible to argue that this is just a particularly colorful way to say divorce, and thus it does not suggest any particular violence on Sejanus’ part. However, I have followed Woodman 2004, 123 in using the stronger term “drove out” and an examination of the rest of the *Annales* shows that *pellere* is not a common term for describing a divorce. The historian almost always employs the word *discidium* (2.86.2, 3.34.5, 11.30.2, 14.1.1, and 14.60.4) while *repudium* also sees use once (3.22.1). In contrast, there seems to be no parallel for using *pellere* to record a divorce in the *Annales*. With this in mind, Sejanus’ action should be seen as particularly forceful, and likely to provoke resentment in Apicata.

<sup>47</sup> Some might object to this point by arguing that Germanicus’ final words to Agrippina seem like criticisms, and thus potentially indicate the prince’s irritation with her. Mary McHugh, however,

forefront of the reader's mind. Her emotional response to her husband's death further demonstrates her devotion to him. Tacitus states that Agrippina was "exhausted by grief" (*defessa luctu*: Tac. *Ann.* 2.75.1) after Germanicus died, and later claims that she was "violent with grief" (*violenta luctu*: Tac. *Ann.* 3.1.1) while resting at Corcyra on her return trip to Rome. The repetition of the word *luctu* in grammatically identical clauses emphasizes Agrippina's strong emotional response, further pointing to her loyalty and love for the deceased Germanicus.

Drusus' wife Livia does not show equal consideration for her husband. As mentioned above, she commits adultery with Sejanus, an act that the historian regards as a disgrace to her noble birth (Tac. *Ann.* 4.3.4), and assists the praetorian prefect in his scheme to murder her own husband. Obviously, this reflects poorly upon her, and the contrast with Agrippina requires no explanation.<sup>48</sup> What does merit explanation, however, is why Livia decides to kill her husband. At first, it may be tempting to conclude that her wicked actions are a result of her bad moral character, and as Sinclair notes, prior to this point she mainly serves as an inferior foil to other characters, including Agrippina.<sup>49</sup> However, such a reading is ultimately simplistic, and ignores the important role that Sejanus plays in driving Livia to her crimes. Instead, through drawing attention to Sejanus' corrupting influence, the historian uses Livia's mariticide to make a larger point about the corrosion of morality in Tiberius' principate.

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convincingly shows that Germanicus' words were not as critical as they may appear, and that he was merely attempting to advise Agrippina on how best to protect their children (McHugh 2012, 86-90). In any case, if Tacitus had wanted to show marital problems between Germanicus and Agrippina, he had plenty of opportunity to add clearer evidence, and thus the fact that he did not likely suggests that he wanted to portray their marriage as healthy.

<sup>48</sup> In the interest of transparency, I feel compelled to mention that there is one writer who has argued that Agrippina poisoned Germanicus (Dando-Collins 2008, 223-228). I do not, however, find Dando-Collins' argument convincing, and it cannot be decisive. In any case, even if Agrippina really did poison Germanicus, Tacitus certainly does not present the event in this way.

<sup>49</sup> Sinclair 1990, 242-243.



In order to determine what this point is, it is necessary to define Sejanus' role in the narrative. Christina Kraus has argued that Tacitus adopted Sallust's method of using one extremely corrupt individual to represent the corruption of the state as a whole, and she identifies Sejanus as such a character.<sup>50</sup> In other words, within the *Annales*, Sejanus is more than just a historical figure. He is the very embodiment of the immorality that plagues Tiberius' reign, and thus his interaction with Livia has a metaphorical layer that is instrumental for understanding the narrative meaning of this passage. Strikingly, while a reader knows in some sense that Livia is ultimately responsible for her decision to participate in Drusus' murder, she has almost no agency in this scene. Tacitus reports that once Sejanus "took possession of [Livia's] first disgrace"<sup>51</sup> (*primi flagitii potitus est*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.3.3) he "drove" (*impulit*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.3.3) the princess to assist his effort to poison Drusus. The appearance of such strong, violent words, as well as Sejanus' syntactical status as the subject of the sentence, presents Livia as a passive and helpless tool dragged along by the living malevolence that is the praetorian prefect. The effect of this presentation is clear: Livia may have had her faults, but these alone did not bring about her crime. On the contrary, her figurative manhandling suggests that even if she had been as virtuous as Agrippina, she still would have been powerless to resist the adulterer's advances. Instead, it was the general corruption of the emperor's court, embodied in the figure of Sejanus, that made Livia turn to crime. Ironically, then, the rumors that Tacitus attempted to refute seem to contain some degree of truth. Tiberius was, to an extent, complicit in his son's death.

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<sup>50</sup> Kraus 2009, 104.

<sup>51</sup> That is, her adultery with Sejanus.

To summarize, the killing of Drusus reflects and recalls the death of Germanicus in numerous ways. These similarities prompt a reader to focus on the major differences between the episodes, namely the question of whether the perpetrators are brought to justice and how each victim's wife behaves. Through directing the reader's attention to such differences, the author shows that Tiberius' reign has become considerably worse from 19 to 23 C.E. The limited efficacy that the justice system had at the time of Germanicus' death has evaporated, and crafty schemers can now commit murder with impunity. At the same time, the generally immoral atmosphere pushes wellborn ladies into crime, and seems to leave them with no ability to resist. Thus, the death of Drusus, when considered together with the death of Germanicus, serves as a potent signpost, showcasing the continuing breakdown of justice and morality during Tiberius' principate. The situation has already become dire, and it will only grow worse as the emperor's reign continues.

Sejanus is not content with killing Drusus alone. After stoking the emperor's fears that citizens are rallying behind Agrippina and planning a civil war (*Tac. Ann.* 4.17.3), the minister secures Tiberius' cooperation in targeting a few of her most eager supporters, specifically Gaius Silius and Titius Sabinus (*Tac. Ann.* 4.17.3-4.18.1). At first glance, the linking of these two men seems strange. Their only apparent connection is their friendship with Germanicus, and it seems unreasonable to think that they were the only ones backing the prince's family. Furthermore, as the author himself states, Sejanus decides to proceed against Silius "with Sabinus put off for the moment" (*dilato ad tempus Sabino: Tac. Ann.* 4.19.1). Although the phrase *ad tempus* might cause a reader to believe that Sabinus will be prosecuted shortly after Silius, the second trial occurs about

four years after the first.<sup>52</sup> Even if Sejanus really had planned Sabinus' execution this far in advance, it is highly improbable that the historian could have known his intentions, and Tacitus' language seems far too blunt to be explained by simple foreshadowing. With this in mind, the reference to Sabinus at this point in the work should be understood as a narrative device through which the historian could prompt his audience to consider the trials as a pair. In order to determine why Tacitus would want to link the events in this way, we must first examine the thematic significance of each episode.

Throughout his description of Silius' trial, Tacitus seems entirely concerned with how Tiberius and his appointed prosecutor subvert standard Roman law. Other considerations are minimized. For example, the charges leveled against Silius are relegated to the end of the historian's account, and there are 82 words between the observation that Varro was sent to make the accusation (*inmisusque*) and *conscientia*, the first word indicating the defendant's alleged crime (Tac. *Ann.* 4.19.1-4).<sup>53</sup> Placing the accusations towards the end of the account reduces their impact, and redirects the reader's attention towards the intervening discussion of Tiberius' efforts to circumvent the law. Furthermore, Tacitus prevaricates about the accusations brought against Silius and his wife, stating only that "without a doubt they were caught in the charges of extortion, but everything was carried out with an investigation of treason" (*nec dubie repetundarum criminibus haerebant sed cuncta quaestione maiestatis exercita*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.19.4). The word *sed* seems to imply that Silius did not commit treason, but Tacitus

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<sup>52</sup> See Woodman 2004, 131. Tacitus does not state precisely when Silius' trial occurred, although Sabinus' execution is stated to have taken place on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 28 C.E. The exact timing is not strictly relevant, however, as clearly a considerable amount of time passed between the two events.

<sup>53</sup> For this count, I have used the text printed in Furneaux 1896. One might, of course, be able to argue about precisely where the trial officially begins, but it is clear that the charges are pushed to the end of the historian's account.

never makes this explicit, and even the comment that he was caught in the charge of extortion does not necessarily mean that he was guilty of it. If the historian had merely intended this trial to show the corrupt prosecution of an innocent man, he presumably would not have left Silius' guilt ambiguous, and he generally seems uninterested in discussing this component of the episode.

What does interest the author is Tiberius' manipulation of the Roman legal system in order to obtain his desired outcome. Once the consul Varro is identified as Silius' accuser, the defendant asks for a delay until the man's term in office expires. Tiberius refuses, supposedly on the grounds of republican precedent (Tac. *Ann.* 4.19.2). Tacitus is not impressed, remarking that it was typical of Tiberius "to cover recently invented crimes with ancient words" (*scelera nuper reperta priscis verbis obtegere*). He then derisively states that the trial continued "as though Silius were being litigated by law or Varro were a consul or this were the republic" (*quasi aut legibus cum Silio ageretur aut Varro consul aut illud res publica esset*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.19.2-3).<sup>54</sup> This string of subjunctives, all governed by *quasi*, presents the entire trial as illegitimate. Everything about it is improper, as the senate ignores the law, a sham magistrate presides, and the emperor twists republican practice for his own ends. In the process, Gaius Silius' prosecution and eventual suicide serve to highlight the further perversion of the legal system under Tiberius. Law and precedent have become worse than meaningless, serving merely as tools for the *princeps* to use in order to justify the condemnations of his

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<sup>54</sup> Shotter has argued that Tiberius did not necessarily behave this way out of malice, but instead did so because he believed that it was his duty as emperor not to intervene in court decisions (Shotter 1967, 715-716). This may well be true of the historical Tiberius, but Tacitus clearly wants the reader to view the emperor's actions as corrupt. For example, he begins his description of the trial by noting the enmity between Tiberius and Silius' wife (4.19.1), an observation that casts doubt on the *princeps*' ability to remain impartial. Furthermore, the notion that Tiberius is hiding *scelera* explicitly presents his behavior as criminal.

perceived opponents. With this in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that Silius barely attempted to defend himself in court. He was finished the moment he was accused.

Sejanus' other target, Titius Sabinus, fares no better, and his death also points to the overturning of traditional Roman values. Tacitus begins the year 28 C.E. by describing Sabinus' trial and execution, and the historian loses no time in portraying the episode as entirely reprehensible. In fact, the very first word to appear after the formulaic listing of the year's consuls is "foul" (*foedum*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.68.1), immediately predisposing a reader to view this passage in a negative light. Such an expectation is more than warranted. Four ex-praetors, hoping to win Sejanus' support for the consulate, decide to work together to entrap Sabinus, and choose one from their number, Latinius Latiaris, to gain their victim's trust (Tac. *Ann.* 4.68.2-4). Latiaris then convinces Sabinus to speak against Sejanus and Tiberius while his three accomplices eavesdrop from the rafters, which Tacitus calls "a hiding place not less shameful than their horrible deception" (*haud minus turpi latebra quam detestanda fraude*: Tac. *Ann.* 4.69.1). They in turn relate this information to Tiberius, who, after making prayers for the new year, charges Sabinus on January 1<sup>st</sup> (Tac. *Ann.* 4.69.3-4.70.1). The accused is quickly condemned and executed, declaring himself a sacrificial victim of Sejanus as he is led away (Tac. *Ann.* 4.70.1).

This episode is problematic for multiple reasons. Obviously, the idea that senators felt the best way to advance their careers was to trick one of their comrades into committing a capital crime paints a negative picture of the emperor and his minister, and recalls Firmius Catus' similar treatment of Scribonius Libo Drusus (Tac. *Ann.* 2.27.2).<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the senators' decision to spy on a conversation from the rafters is clearly

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<sup>55</sup> See page 17 of this thesis for Libo's entrapment.

degrading, as the historian himself states in strong terms, and represents the next step in the degradation of the senate. As stated in chapter one, Tiberius coopted the body to pursue his own petty vengeance on the Cappadocian king Archelaus, and by the trial of Clutorius Priscus, the *patres* had begun to take the initiative in punishing minor peccadillos. Here, Latiaris and his accomplices act even worse, as they not only try to avenge slights against the emperor of their own accord, but they also place themselves in a position entirely inappropriate for their status in their efforts to do. The senate, it seems, has continued its decent from a proud governing body, and its members now act like mere sycophants.

There is also a significant sacrilegious aspect to Sabinus' execution. As Peter Corrigan observes, January 1<sup>st</sup> was a sacred day for the Romans, on which only bloodless offerings were made to the gods and individuals were expected to act kindly, as any immoral actions might be considered portentous.<sup>56</sup> Ordering an execution after a shameful entrapment scheme flagrantly violates this custom, and thus, the fact that Tiberius would choose to do so shows that he is completely unconcerned with religious propriety.<sup>57</sup> With this in mind, it is clear why the author chose to link Gaius Silius and Titius Sabinus as victims of Sejanus. Through carefully controlling the narratives of their deaths, Tacitus goes beyond the historical reality of each character, turning them into metaphors for the destruction of proper legal procedure and the destruction of religious piety. In the process, he shows that the corrupting force embodied in Sejanus was not content to pervert only morality, but also systematically attacked the very foundations of Roman society. The emperor, meanwhile, proves no better at resisting this maleficent

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<sup>56</sup> Corrigan 1993, 334-335.

<sup>57</sup> Corrigan 1993, 336-337.

presence than his daughter in law, and gladly plays along with Sejanus' schemes.<sup>58</sup> As the years of Tiberius' reign stretch onwards, Rome's institutions crumble, leaving only a despotic emperor and worthless flatterers in their place.

The fourth book of Tacitus' *Annales* describes a period of great change in the principate. Unfortunately for the people of Rome, none of it is good. The evils that lurked beneath the surface in the first three books continue to grow stronger, and they move from the corners of the palace to an increasingly central position in Tiberius' court. As these evils grow in power, so too does their physical manifestation, Sejanus. The praetorian prefect dominates the book, effortlessly controlling Tiberius and positioning himself as the power behind the throne. But his malice is not restricted to harming people. Through the deaths of Sejanus' victims, Tacitus shows that the minister methodically undermines the very pillars of the state, destroying Roman morality, law, and religion with impunity. Without these supports, Tiberius' reign totters on the edge of tyranny, threatening to collapse into a mass of violence and murder. A reader has no reason to be optimistic that it might survive this crisis unscathed. As time has progressed, Tiberius and his supporters have become worse, not better. Clearly, Rome is as doomed as Sejanus' human victims.

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<sup>58</sup> Tiberius will, of course, ultimately prevail over Sejanus, and Sabinus' accusation may even have been the event that caused the emperor to suspect his advisor's treachery (McCulloch 1980-1981). While the historian's account of Sejanus' downfall is unfortunately lost, the presumed participation of Macro, himself a highly corrupt character, suggests that the historian would not have portrayed Sejanus' death as a triumph of virtue, but rather as a triumph of a greater evil over a lesser one.

### Chapter 3: *Digna Cognitu*: A Close-Reading of the Sixth Book of Tacitus' *Annales*

“The concluding book of the hexad carries a dreary epilogue down to the extinction of the old emperor, with many prosecutions and deaths, with little extraneous or antiquarian matter for variegation.”<sup>59</sup> Such was Sir Ronald Syme’s description of the sixth book of Tacitus’ *Annales*. It is not difficult to see why he would have viewed the book in this way, as it is certainly not light reading. As the final years of Tiberius’ reign lurch to a grim conclusion, the now unrestrained *princeps* heaps murder upon murder, creating the bleak impression that a terrified Rome is trembling at the furious emperor. Tacitus himself even interrupts the narrative to comment on the negative subject matter, noting that other writers may have found the material “excessive and sorrowful” (*nimia et maesta*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.7.5), but resolving to continue anyway in order to relate things “worthy of knowing” (*digna cognitu*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.7.5). Given that the historian made such an admission, one might expect the death scenes in this book to lose their structural significance and to serve as little more than sensationalist anecdotes designed to portray Tiberius in an overwhelmingly negative light. Despite all appearances, however, this section is not merely a monotonous sequence of murders, and deaths maintain their role as important compositional elements. I will argue that Tacitus uses the sequence of deaths in the sixth book of his *Annales* to trace the progression of the final years of Tiberius’ reign, and to cast Macro as an emerging malevolence who ensures that imperial murder will continue unabated. As he does so, the historian transforms what could have

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<sup>59</sup> Syme 1958, 256.



been a repetitive and dismal narrative into a powerful chronicle that leaves a lasting impression on the reader.

The traditional opening of the sixth book of the *Annales*<sup>60</sup> sets a dramatic scene, as the anxious *princeps*, fearing potential backlash for his infamous lusts, wavers over whether he should return to Rome. This hesitation, however, does not last long, and Tiberius quickly launches into the trials that will come to characterize the end of his reign. His first victim is Sextius Paconianus.<sup>61</sup> Tacitus' Paconianus is by no means a pleasant or innocent man. Indeed, the historian refers to him as a "bold evildoer prying into the secrets of everyone" and notes that Sejanus chose him to help prepare a deception for Gaius Caesar (*audacem maleficum omnium secreta rimantem delectumque ab Seiano cuius ope dolus G. Caesari pararetur*: Tac. Ann. 6.3.4). Naturally, the senate receives news of the villain's prosecution with great joy. Although Tacitus relates these three characteristics of Paconianus in the same sentence and joins them with a connective "-que," his subsequent comment that the senate prepared the greatest penalty for the accused "after which thing was made known" (*quod postquam patefactum*: Tac. Ann. 6.3.4) indicates that his punishment came about as a result of his cooperation with Sejanus, not his general wickedness. Presumably Paconianus' bad habits were well known, as otherwise the senate would have no reason to delight in his trial, and thus the revelation of the plot must be the information that spurred the prosecution. Although the defendant did temporarily escape punishment by acting as an informer, the placement of

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<sup>60</sup> Although the trend in more recent scholarship has been to consider the sections formerly labeled 5.6-5.11 as part of book six (see for example, Woodman 2004, 163), due to the fragmentary nature of those sections and this paper's focus on analyzing scenes in context, I will not discuss sections 5.6-5.11. Ultimately, where precisely the book begins is unimportant for my argument, as none of the trends that will be identified depend upon those particular chapters being excluded from the book.

<sup>61</sup> The character named as Sextius Paconianus is now generally believed to be Sextilius Paconianus (see, for example, Woodman 2017, 103), but here, I have chosen to use the name that appears in the manuscripts.

his trial so close to the beginning of the book shows the reader that the emperor's primary concern is attacking the friends of Sejanus. In short, in 32 C.E., to be evil was perfectly acceptable, but to work with Sejanus was not.

With this in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that the next accusation is against Latinius Latianus, who, the historian reminds us, had been chiefly responsible for the prosecution of Titius Sabinus (Tac. *Ann.* 6.4.1).<sup>62</sup> While describing this episode earlier, Tacitus noted that Sabinus' accusers targeted him because they wanted to win Sejanus' favor (Tac. *Ann.* 4.68.2), and thus, by referring to this passage, Tacitus ties Latianus more explicitly to Sejanus. After the matter of Latianus has been settled, Haterius Agrippa unsuccessfully attacks the consuls of the previous year, Trio and Regulus, criticizing them for their silence after "a reciprocal accusation had been directed" (*mutua accusatione intenta*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.4.2) during their consulship. This charge, too, is ultimately tied to Sejanus. The historian remarks that Trio charged that "Regulus was slow to crush the accomplices of Sejanus" (*segnem Regulum ad opprimendos Seiani ministros*: Tac. *Ann.* 5.11.1), and Regulus responded by accusing Trio of "conspiracy" (*conurationis* : Tac *Ann.* 5.11.1). Precisely what conspiracy is not specified, but considering the timing of this scene, it seems most likely that it involved Sejanus. This rapid succession of accusations relating to the disgraced praetorian prefect further supports the notion that the prosecutions of this period are focused solely on eliminating his friends and companions.

Unexpectedly, however, the next man to be accused, Cotta Messalinus, has nothing to do with Sejanus. Instead, Cotta is tried for a number of crimes relating to

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<sup>62</sup> See pages 43-44 of this thesis for a summary of Sabinus' trial.

disrespecting the imperial house, including questioning Gaius Caligula's virility, disparaging the funeral banquets of Livia, and referring to Tiberius in a potentially insulting manner (Tac. *Ann.* 6.5.1). The historian does not say that these accusations are true, but neither does he cast doubt on them as he does at other points within the *Annales*,<sup>63</sup> implying that they are not spurious. In addition, immediately after his name is mentioned, Cotta is described as "the originator of each most cruel opinion" (*saevissimae cuiusque sententiae auctor*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.5.1). Such a negative description predisposes the reader to see Cotta as guilty before the charges against him are even read, and creates little reason to believe that he might be innocent. The senate seems to agree, and all the signs appear to point to an impending conviction.

But this conviction ultimately never comes, as a timely letter from Tiberius saves Cotta. That Tiberius would choose to intercede here is particularly noteworthy, as, while other defendants in this book have escaped punishment, none has yet done so through the direct intervention of the emperor. At first glance, the emperor's involvement may seem to provide merely another example of how Tiberius cares little for justice and protects evil men, and Tacitus' comments on the damage to the *princeps*' spirit (Tac. *Ann.* 6.6.2) appear to support such an interpretation. However, in the context of the rash of accusations against the friends of Sejanus, Tiberius' action becomes much more significant. While concluding his defense of Cotta, he demands that "the candor of banquet talk not be considered a crime" (*neu convivalium fabularum simplicitas in crimen ducerentur*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.5.2). In other words, the *princeps* does not attempt to refute the charges made against Cotta, arguing instead that his actions were not grievous

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<sup>63</sup> See for example, Tacitus' response to the rumor that Tiberius murdered his son Drusus (4.11) or his acknowledgement that Tiberius may have been tricked into accusing Sextus Vistilius (6.9.2).

enough to warrant a penalty. Cotta's unexpected acquittal, occurring among a number of trials against Sejanus' associates, shows the reader that Tiberius' focus is directed exclusively towards punishing the allies of his former minister. Any other crime is little more than a distraction for the vindictive *princeps*.

Thus far, the sixth book of Tacitus' *Annales* has begun with a relentless and rapid barrage of accusations against prominent men. While the success of these charges varies significantly, all but one can be tied strongly to Sejanus, and the emperor quickly brushes aside that one exception as a mere trifle. The effect of these chapters is twofold. First, this sequence of events demonstrates Tacitus' skill as a writer, in that the quick succession of trials and the dismissal of the charges against Cotta Messalinus subtly but effectively convey the extent of Tiberius' single-minded wrath, leaving a powerful impression that the *princeps* is entirely devoted to one cause. Secondly, these trials, together with the prosecutions of Quintus Servaeus and Minucius Thermus following the acquittal of Cotta (Tac. *Ann.* 6.7.2), leave the reader with the grim expectation that the bloodbath following the downfall of Sejanus will stretch on throughout the entire book. Elizabeth Keitel observes that the sixth book in general has a melancholy tone,<sup>64</sup> and such an expectation was almost certainly meant to contribute.

And yet the accusations against the partners of Sejanus do not persist. On the contrary, they come to an end rather quickly after Cotta escapes punishment. Upon being arraigned on this account, the *eques* Marcus Terentius embraces his association with the former praetorian prefect, delivering a lengthy speech in *oratio recta* in which he argues that any sensible man would attempt to court Sejanus' favor, and that the *princeps*

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<sup>64</sup> Keitel 1999,437.

himself held the man in high regard for 16 years until his fall from power (Tac. *Ann.* 6.8). The effect of this speech is immediate, as the historian notes that Terentius' words were so powerful that they caused the very men who had accused him to be punished with exile or death (Tac. *Ann.* 6.9.1). While much could be said about the thematic significance of the scene,<sup>65</sup> its structural significance is of more importance for this chapter, as the speech and failed accusation of Terentius serve to mark a key turning point in the narrative of this book. The ability to charge individuals based on their relationship to Sejanus has completely collapsed, providing a clear sign that the subsequent trials, executions, and murders cannot be attributed to Tiberius' fury against him, but should rather be attributed to the fact that Tiberius is corrupt and enjoys killing people.

And indeed he does enjoy it. Immediately after the resolution of Terentius' trial, the *princeps* shatters any hope that his temperament might improve, sending a letter condemning Sextus Vistilius, either because Vistilius had written things alleging that Gaius Caesar was "lewd" (*impudicum*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.9.2), or because the *princeps* "trusted in something false" (*facto habita fides*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.9.2). After a failed appeal to Tiberius, Vistilius proceeds to kill himself. While this scene may seem to be just another entry in a long list of Tiberius' murders, a closer examination reveals that Tacitus presents the *princeps*' conduct as particularly unjust. In the process, Vistilius' death demonstrates that the end of the procedures involving Sejanus has not brought a return to normalcy, but rather has exacerbated imperial cruelty. The first indication that Tiberius is acting in a particularly bloodthirsty manner is the fact that this episode occurs right on the heels of

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<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Sinclair 184-190.

Terentius' acquittal. Directly after explaining the punishments of Terentius' accusers, the narrative leaps into the charges against Vistilius, connecting the two sections with a measly *dehinc*. By reducing the distance between these events to a negligible level, Tacitus presents the image of a *princeps* who literally cannot wait to commit murder; the one trial is scarcely finished and he is already working towards another. Clearly, this reflects poorly on Tiberius and primes a reader to view the fate of Vistilius as that much more improper.

Similarly, the charges against the defendant seem particularly foolish, especially in context. As mentioned above, Tacitus openly presents the possibility that Vistilius may be entirely innocent, something that he did not do, for example, when describing the trial of Cotta Messalinus. The mentioning of this possibility appears designed to induce a reader to see the accusation as blatantly false, as there would be little reason to record it if the historian believed that Vistilius was guilty. In addition, earlier in the book, Cotta was pardoned for charging that Gaius Caesar was of "impure virility" (*incestae virilitatis*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.5.1) and Sextius Paconianus survived despite plotting against the future emperor, although he did need to become an informer to do so (Tac. *Ann.* 6.3.4). While it is difficult to state Roman values with precision, it seems highly improbable that Tacitus' audience would have considered Vistilius' insult to be much worse than Cotta's, and plotting against Gaius presumably would have been worse than disparaging him. As a result, Tiberius' decision to work directly in order to bring about Vistilius' death seems completely arbitrary, causing the death itself to seem more indicative of cruelty.

Finally, Vistilius' accusation is notable in the fact that Tiberius personally orchestrates it. Tacitus comments that the trial was instigated by a letter of the emperor,

the only direct action taken against Vistilius was his removal from Tiberius' circle, and that Vistilius only went through with his suicide after he received a negative response to his entreaties, all events in which the emperor played a direct role. In addition, the *princeps* is presented as the sole actor working against Vistilius in this episode. While Tiberius' letter was presumably written to the senate, the historian suppresses any mention of the body – a fact that stands in marked contrast to the trial of Paconianus, which, although also instigated by a letter of Tiberius, explicitly names the *patres* (Tac. *Ann.* 6.3.4). The weaving of Tiberius throughout this chapter, coupled with the complete omission of the senate's role, presents the emperor as entirely responsible for Vistilius' death, removing any possibility of excusing his wicked behavior.

When these three things are taken together, it becomes clear that Vistilius' accusation and subsequent suicide are not merely reiterations of the same themes already expressed in the book. Instead, the episode is presented in such a way as to render it significantly worse than the prosecutions that opened the sixth book of the *Annales*. In the process, Tacitus cleverly shows how Tiberius has progressed into even greater tyranny now that his fury against Sejanus has abated. The following events establish that this shift in the *princeps*' character is not temporary, as he adds five new defendants in the same chapter, and subsequently has the innocent woman Vitia slaughtered for crying at the death of her son (Tac. *Ann.* 6.10.1). That this string of cruel murders should come immediately after the particularly nasty death of Vistilius hardly seems accidental. Rather, Vistilius' suicide should be viewed as a flag, indicating to the reader that Tiberius has entered into a new phase of cruelty, and showing how Tacitus used deaths in the sixth book of the *Annales* to trace developments in the final years of Tiberius' rule.

Surprisingly, however, Tacitus interrupts his dark narrative to provide an obituary for Lucius Piso, a refreshing natural death amidst so many murders. This obituary is uncharacteristically positive for this book, and complimentary words abound, such as *claritudine, sapienter, moderans, decus, gloria* and *temperavit*. (Tac. *Ann.* 6.10.3). As Syme notes, funerary notices in the *Annales* are the “the product[s] of will and choice,”<sup>66</sup> and thus, there must be a reason why Tacitus would include a section that seems to clash with the book’s overall mood. The answer may, perhaps, lie in Tacitus’ admission in chapter seven that the sequence of deaths might disgust a reader. With this in mind, the laudatory obituary for Piso can be seen as a narrative device through which Tacitus could keep a particularly harrowing part of the chronicle from becoming so horrifying that his audience might stop reading. If this argument is accepted, then the fact that Piso must share the chapter with the death of Vitia and two *delatores* is even more striking, for it suggests that, even when trying to be more hopeful, the sixth book of the *Annales* cannot fully escape from death.

Not long after Piso dies, Tacitus begins to describe the year 33 C.E. Unlike much of book six, this section has typically received more scholarly attention, starting with Syme’s assertion that it represented a turning point in Tiberius’ rule that mixed murder and marriage.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps the most shocking episode from this year is the death of Drusus, son of Germanicus, whose pitiful end the historian relates in detail (Tac. *Ann.* 6.23-24) before describing the extinctions of Agrippina, Cocceius Nerva, and Plancina. With the exception of Nerva, these characters are all connected through the figure of Germanicus, but the reason for Nerva’s inclusion is not immediately apparent. A clue can perhaps be

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<sup>66</sup> Syme 2012, 246.

<sup>67</sup> Woodman 2006, 175.



found in A. J. Woodman's observation that Drusus, Agrippina, and Nerva all die of starvation.<sup>68</sup> He argues that Cocceius Nerva chose to end his life in this way in order to join his death with the other two, thus explaining why Nerva's death comes between that of Agrippina and that of Plancina, which one might expect would occur together due to their mutual enmity.<sup>69</sup> While Woodman is correct in detecting the similarities in the method of death for these characters and arguing that the order of the deaths is important, his analysis may not quite illuminate the full significance of this section. For, the starvations of Drusus, Agrippina, and Nerva are not equal. Rather, they gradually become less horrifying, reflecting a temporary subsidence in the fury of Tiberius and a brief return to normal order.

While all three of these characters starve, the manner in which they do so differs markedly. The historian observes that Drusus was "killed, although he had supported himself until the ninth day with pitiable nourishments, by eating the stuffing from his bed" (*extinguitur cum se miserandis alimentis mandendo e cubili tomento nonum ad diem detinuisset*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.23.2). By using a passive verb and noting that Drusus desperately held on to life through the only food available to him, Tacitus confirms that the victim did not choose to die, but rather had death forced upon him. In contrast, Agrippina is said to have starved herself voluntarily, although the narrator does present the possibility that she was murdered (Tac. *Ann.* 6.25.1). Finally, we are informed that Cocceius Nerva "undertook a plan to die with his body uninjured" (*corpore inlaeso moriendi consilium cepit*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.26.1). Unlike Drusus', Nerva's death is described using an active verb and he is specifically stated to have been unharmed, showing the

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<sup>68</sup> Woodman 2006, 187.

<sup>69</sup> Woodman 2006, 187.

reader that his death was completely voluntary. As such, these starvations show a clear progression from worse to better, ranging from the unambiguous murder of Drusus, to the possible murder of Agrippina, and finally to the unambiguous, voluntary suicide of Cocceius Nerva.

In a similar manner, the deaths occupy progressively less space within the text. Drusus' is told in over 150 words, Agrippina's in about 100, and Nerva's in around 70.<sup>70</sup> The progressive shortening of these episodes further contributes to the impression that the situation is improving, or, at least, becoming less bad, as the reader is made to spend less time focusing on the lurid details of each starvation.

Finally, and most strikingly, Tiberius' responses to each death show a change from the greatest cruelty to sadness and genuine regret. After having Drusus murdered, the *princeps* rails against the corpse and has accounts of his grandson's horrible treatment read aloud in the senate. While Tiberius has done many evil deeds throughout the first hexad, the historian presents his treatment of Drusus as especially egregious, noting that "No other thing seemed more savage than this" (*quo non aliud atrocius visum: Tac. Ann. 6.24.1*). The use of this comparative structure instead of a superlative adjective, which could potentially be translated only as "very savage," shows clearly that Tacitus wanted the reader to view the abuse of Drusus as the pinnacle of the emperor's savagery, rather than just another entry on its high plateau. This impression is strengthened by the fact that the public would not have even believed these reports if the centurion and freedman overseeing the torture had not been so thorough in their documentation (*Tac. Ann.*

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<sup>70</sup> I have used Woodman 2017 for this count.

6.24.1). The addition of this detail signals that Tiberius' actions have reached a new depth of cruelty, one that would be unbelievable if it were not so well attested.

The emperor's reaction to Agrippina's starvation, while still horrifying, does not quite reach the extremes of the previous chapter. As with Drusus, the *princeps* hurls nasty charges at the dead woman, and even boasts about not having had her murdered (Tac. *Ann.* 6.25.2-3). While these actions are undoubtedly cruel, except for a mention that the charges are "most foul" (*foedissima*) and the use of the word "slaughter" (*necis*), this passage lacks many of the explicitly condemnatory terms such as "more savage" (*atrocius*) and "horrible" (*diras*) that pervaded the section describing the death of Drusus. In addition, Tacitus does not say that the citizens had a hard time believing that Tiberius would act this way, and in fact he does not mention the popular response at all. The omission is particularly notable when Agrippina's death is compared to that of her husband, whose end saw abundant public displays of grief in Rome (Tac. *Ann.* 2.82). The historian could have referenced these events, or otherwise mentioned general sadness over the possible murder of Germanicus' wife, but he does not, giving the scene a more muted quality. These two factors suggest that, although the emperor's response to Agrippina's death should be viewed as pitiless, it was not ultimately as bad as the one preceding it. This time, at least, the emperor's cruelty stayed within its usual bounds.

Cocceius Nerva's suicide, on the other hand, evokes an entirely different reaction from the bloodthirsty *princeps*. Upon learning of the man's decision to take his own life, Tiberius begs him to reconsider, stating in *oratio obliqua* that the death of one of his closest friends would be "burdensome to his conscience" (*grave conscientiae*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.26.1). While it is certainly possible to view Tiberius' entreaties as self-serving, and he

seems equally concerned for his reputation and morality, the fact that he would mention an impact on his conscience at all is significant. Evidently his conscience was not of any importance to him while murdering his grandson and daughter in law, and thus, the appearance of it here shows that Tiberius' mental state has improved to some degree.

Taking these three factors into consideration, the deaths of Drusus, Agrippina, and Cocceius Nerva may be regarded as a tricolon diminuens. As the narrative progresses, each individual has more control over his or her death, the scenes become shorter, and the fury of Tiberius subsides from its peak, transforming into concern, even if that concern may not be entirely selfless. It is in this context that the death of Plancina, which occupies the other portion of chapter 26, must be analyzed.

At first, it is tempting to see Plancina as merely another victim of this violent year, albeit a rather unsympathetic one. But she is not. The historian notes that in her death, "justice prevailed" (*ius valuit*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.26.3), and records that the penalty was "late rather than undeserved" (*sera magis quam immerita*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.26.3). These explicit statements that Plancina deserved her trial and subsequent suicide are noteworthy. Had the historian merely mentioned her hostility to Germanicus, some readers would have concluded that the punishment was fair, but it also would have been possible to see Plancina as a victim. By openly stating, not once, but twice, that the penalty was fitting, Tacitus effectively seals this alternative reading, leaving his audience with only one possible interpretation of the scene. This is not murder; this is justice. As a result, the death of Plancina should be viewed as a return to normal order following the deadly events that form the center of Tacitus' account of the year 33 C. E. With this in mind, it is clear why Plancina's death occurs after Nerva's, as her suicide represents the

capstone of this progression from the greatest wrath of Tiberius, down to a reassertion of justice.

Why would Tacitus have chosen to create such a progression? In order to answer that question, it is first necessary to examine the sections that follow Plancina's death. Chapter 27 shows a continuation of standard operations, as Tiberius' granddaughter Julia marries Rubellius Blandus, a match presumably arranged by the *princeps*. The marriage of a member of the imperial family to a man with an unimpressive pedigree did distress the people, as the historian emphasizes by stating that she "married down" (*denupsit*<sup>71</sup>: Tac. *Ann.* 6.27.1). In spite of the people's unenthusiastic reaction, securing marriages and working to continue the family line would have been the duty of any good *paterfamilias*. In other words, the emperor has now ceased his executions and begun to perform the actions that he should be performing. Admittedly, he is not handling his duties well, but it would have been out of character for Tacitus' Tiberius to do anything properly by this point in his reign, so the fact that he is trying at all suggests some improvement in his behavior.

The same chapter also features the obituaries of three men: Aelius Lamia, Flaccus Pomponius, and Marcus Lepidus. Each one is presented in a positive manner, with the historian noting the noble ancestry and lively old age of Lamia, recording Tiberius' praise of Pomponius, and including a *praeteritio* in which he alludes to the restraint, wisdom, and good birth of Lepidus (Tac. *Ann.* 6.27.2-4). These obituaries further demonstrate that the situation in Rome has become more normal, as proper grieving practices return<sup>72</sup> and

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<sup>71</sup> This particular word is not common, but when it does appear, it is with a negative connotation. See, for example, Ovid's use when describing Caenis' spurning of marriage (Ov. *Met.* 12.196) and Suetonius' use while describing Nero's "marriage" to one of his freedmen. (Suet. *Ner.* 29.)

<sup>72</sup> As compared to when, for example, Vitia was killed for weeping at her son's death (Tac. *Ann.* 6.10.1).

natural deaths replace murders. This is especially the case with Lamia, who received a censor's funeral, an honor usually declared by the senate,<sup>73</sup> suggesting that the *patres* were no longer preoccupied with treason trials. It is important to note that this chapter is not entirely positive, as the historian does include a reference to Tiberius detaining Arruntius out of fear (Tac. *Ann.* 6.27.3), but overall the trend of a return to more traditional business and a less grim atmosphere in general continues.

From here, the historian at last leaves behind the bloody year 33 and moves into 34 C.E., noting the appearance of the phoenix at this time. Significantly, this detail differs from the accounts of Pliny the Elder and Cassius Dio, who record that the bird was seen a few years later.<sup>74</sup> The phoenix has long been accepted as a symbol of renewal,<sup>75</sup> but there has been little agreement as to the renewal of what. Keitel argues that part of the phoenix's significance is to serve as a piece of connective imagery showing that Gaius Caesar will be just as merciless as Tiberius.<sup>76</sup> Her argument is convincing, and this is likely part of the symbolism that Tacitus employs. However, the phoenix may also represent a more pointed rebirth within the sixth book of the *Annales*. That is, the rebirth of *maiestas*.

Immediately following the appearance of the phoenix, Tacitus relates the suicides of Pomponius Labeo and Mamercus Scaurus. Labeo's death is perhaps meant to establish a contrast between the devout phoenix and Tiberius' refusal to allow the burial of bodies,<sup>77</sup> but little more need be said about it for our purposes. Scaurus' trial, on the

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<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Tac. *Ann.* 4.15.2, where Lucilius Longus' censorial funeral is specifically stated to have been decreed by the senate.

<sup>74</sup> Keitel 1999, 430.

<sup>75</sup> Hubaux and Leroy 1939, as cited through Keitel 1999, 431.

<sup>76</sup> Keitel 1999, 436.

<sup>77</sup> Keitel 1999, 434.

other hand, has large structural significance. Tiberius' wrath is primarily roused against Scaurus due to the influence of Macro, whom Tacitus notes was "practicing [Sejanus'] same tricks more secretly" (*easdem artes occultius exercebat*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.29.3).

Although Macro presumably played some role in the removal of his predecessor,<sup>78</sup> this is the first time he has someone accused in the surviving text of the *Annales*, and the fact that Tacitus felt a need to explain that he employed the same tricks as Sejanus indicates that this is likely the first time ever. The word *easdem* serves to present Macro as a return of Sejanus. However, the two are not completely similar, as Macro's attacks are more secretive. This presumably makes him more dangerous as an adversary, and thus, at least part of the phoenix's symbolism is the rebirth of a more menacing Sejanus in Macro.

Likewise, the charges leveled against Scaurus represent a return to an earlier event in the *Annales*. While Tiberius primarily sought to destroy Scaurus on account of his anger at a tragedy written by the accused, the official charges against the man include adultery with Livia and *sacra magorum* ("the rites of wizards": Tac. *Ann.* 6.29.4). The phrase *sacra magorum* is rare in Tacitus, appearing only twice in the entire extant portions of the *Annales*: here and at the trial of Scribonius Libo Drusus (Tac. *Ann.* 2.27.2). The reappearance of this same phrase to describe the allegations directed at Scaurus encourages a reader to remember Libo's trial, and in the process connects these two scenes. Some may argue, however, that it would be difficult for a reader to remember the fact that Tacitus used the same words four books earlier, and thus most readers would not have been able to make such a connection. The historian has

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<sup>78</sup> Woodman 2004,173.

anticipated this. While discussing the forced suicide of Vesularius Flaccus earlier in the sixth book, Tacitus remarks that “Vesularius had been the go-between of the plots against Libo” (*Vesularius insidiarum in Libonem internuntius*: Tac. Ann. 6.10.2). The reappearance of Libo’s name not long before the same charges are leveled against Scaurus primes a reader to remember the former’s trial. It is highly unlikely that these two features are accidental, and thus, it seems clear that Tacitus wants his audience to associate Libo and Scaurus.

What could be the purpose of such an association? The answer perhaps lies in his comment that he chooses to relate the trial and subsequent suicide of Libo in detail “because then first the things which consumed the state for so many years were invented” (*quia tum primum reperta sunt quae per tot annos rem publicam exedere*: Tac. Ann. 2.27.1). In other words, Libo is the first individual to be convicted on a charge of *maiestas*,<sup>79</sup> and the historian explicitly states that this is so. In joining the death of Scaurus to the scene that marks the beginning of successful *maiestas* trials, Tacitus casts it as its own beginning of a new period of paranoia in the principate, a period which will prove even more deadly than the one begun by Libo’s ill-fated death.

With all of this in mind, it is time to return to the year 33 in order to see the full picture. In this year, Tacitus hands the reader a tricolon of deaths, which gradually subside from great cruelty to genuine guilt. After these there is a brief return to order, which sees the execution of a criminal, the arranging of royal marriages, and state funerals. Next, the phoenix appears, and it is soon followed by a prosecution and suicide that references the very first *maiestas* trial in the *Annales* to secure a conviction. This

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<sup>79</sup> Libo is not the first person to be arraigned for *maiestas*, as Granius Marcellus was tried for it towards the end of the first book of the *Annales* (Tac. Ann. 1.74.6). However, Tiberius relents after a piercing question from Cn. Piso, so Libo’s trial more accurately represents the beginning of *maiestas*.



prosecution also seems to mark the first murder on the part of Macro, a man who has some similarity to the master-murderer Sejanus, but is even more dangerous. The sequence of these events makes the symbolism of the phoenix clear. The bird *is* a symbol of rebirth. But it is the rebirth of murder, murder which, guided by the crafty hand of a new praetorian prefect, will blaze more violently than it ever has before.

In this context, it is possible to observe two additional effects created by the temporary reappearance of more standard business following the death of Cocceius Nerva. First, this short interlude serves to increase the emotional impact of the emperor's return to murder. The brief period in which the emperor's fury seems to be relaxing causes the reader to consider how things might have been had Tiberius possessed a better nature, and whether it would have been possible for him to reject his bloodthirsty impulses and end his reign by attending to his duties as *princeps*. Of course, a savvy reader knows that this ultimately will not be the case, and the appearance of the phoenix likely would have seemed more foreboding than optimistic.<sup>80</sup> Even so, the few chapters between the suicide of Nerva and the trial of Scaurus offer a window into a world in which Tiberius' reign did not need to end in cruelty, a window which serves to make the fact that it does all the more painful.

Secondly, the impression that events in Rome were improving serves to make Macro's character seem all the more repugnant. If the first murder at his urging had come amid a series of others ordered by Tiberius, Macro would not have appeared as a particularly wicked character. After all, one could argue that he certainly did not improve the emperor's state of mind, but there would have been no evidence that he was actively

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<sup>80</sup> Keitel 1999, 439.

worsening it. Thus, by placing a lull in the *princeps*' wrath directly before the accusations against Scaurus, Tacitus leaves no doubt in the reader's mind as to who is responsible for the remaining bloodshed in book six. In the process, the historian establishes the praetorian prefect as far worse than the many schemers, *delatores*, and general villains who populate the *Annales*. His malignant presence violently jerks the last few years of the aging emperor's reign from their more merciful track and ensures that they will be filled with bloodletting.

Following a few more punishments, the historian, as he himself states (Tac. *Ann.* 6.38.1), provides some relief with a digression on Parthian affairs. An observant reader will suspect, however, that with a man like Macro urging on the *princeps*, this period of calm will not last. And indeed it does not. Chapters 38 and 39 include a slew of murders, occurring one after another and demonstrating that Tiberius' bloodlust has returned, as strong as it ever was. Particularly noteworthy is the strangulation of Sextius Paconianus, whose life was spared in chapter three of this book on account of his willingness to provide evidence against Sejanus' other confidants. Tacitus notes that Paconianus was killed in prison "on account of poems repeatedly composed against the emperor there (*ob carmina illic in principem factitata*: Tac *Ann.* 6.39.1). The author does not employ any of his usual methods for casting doubt on the validity of these charges, and the use of the iterative *factitata* instead of *facta* seems to suggest that Paconianus did this frequently, so he likely should be viewed as guilty. That said, however, it is hard to imagine what real harm the man could have done in prison, especially considering that earlier the *princeps* did not consider Cotta Messalinus' public insults against the imperial family a crime worth punishing (Tac. *Ann.* 6.5.2). Thus, it is certainly tempting to see

Tiberius' readiness to execute a man he spared earlier in the book as a sign of his continuing moral degradation.

The beginning of the year 36 C.E., expectedly, begins with further murders, including that of the *eques* Vibulenus Agrippa.<sup>81</sup> While the scene detailing Agrippa's death may seem to be a macabre diversion, it is of pivotal importance, showing the sheer foolishness of the executions under Tiberius. The historian himself acknowledges this, stating that other deaths were not being noticed<sup>82</sup> as savage due to the "customariness of evil things" (*adsuetudine malorum*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.40.1), but that the death of Agrippa "terrified" (*exterruit*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.40.1). Tacitus establishes this clear contrast before discussing the suicide in order to show the reader that this episode is not merely one of many in a tedious list. Instead, he alerts his audience that the following event will be particularly noteworthy, encouraging a close reading of this passage.

The suicide does not disappoint. Once his accusers have finished speaking, the *eques* pulls poison from his clothes and drinks it in the presence of the senators, after which the emperor's lictors dutifully hang his dead body (Tac. *Ann.* 6.40.1). This scene reads like a melodramatic tragedy, not the official business of the senate. For example, the historian relates that Agrippa pulled forth the poison from his garment, a detail that was not necessary for an understanding of the suicide.<sup>83</sup> By including this point, Tacitus shows that Agrippa's actions were planned in advance, and thus "scripted" in some sense,

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<sup>81</sup> Some speculate that Vibulenus should be read as Vibullius (see Woodman 2017, 254-255 for discussion of this issue.) Here, I have used Vibulenus, as that matches the text that Woodman has printed. In any case, the man's actual name is immaterial to this argument.

<sup>82</sup> I have accepted Woodman's conclusion (2017, 253-254) that there must be a lacuna at the beginning of this chapter that would have included a word to negate "*advertetur*." The existence of such a word seems probable, in order to explain the use of "*sed*" before "*exterruit*," and the mentioning of the "*adsuetudine malorum*" would make little sense without a negation.

<sup>83</sup> Compare, for example, Suetonius' account of defendants poisoning themselves in the curia (Suet. *Tib.* 61.4), which presumably alludes to this event. Here, the biographer has not included from where the poison came, and Tacitus likely did not need to either.

and frames the poison as a stage prop, reducing the trial to little more than a show. In addition, the author's comment that the poisoning occurs *in ipsa curia* reminds the reader that there was an audience of senators to witness this event, adding to the theatrical impression. What should be a serious and horrifying episode comes across as little more than a gruesome stage play, bringing the choreographed and affected nature of trials under Tiberius into clear relief, leaving little doubt that the emperor has completely perverted justice at the close of his reign.

The timing of Agrippa's suicide also serves to point to the corrupt nature of prosecutions at the end of Tiberius' rule. Tacitus notes that Agrippa drank the poison "when the accusers had finished speaking" (*cum perorassent accusatores*: Tac. Ann. 6.40.1). The usage of a temporal *cum*-clause links the two events tightly, suggesting that Agrippa poisoned himself immediately after the prosecution had rested its case. Naturally, this information reflects poorly upon the state of the legal system. The accused evidently did not even attempt to defend himself, presumably because he knew that it would have been pointless. In Tiberius' court, all that mattered was the prosecution's words, and the defendant was doomed from the moment he entered the curia.

Despite this manifest evidence of corruption, it still might be possible to see something positive in Agrippa's suicide. After all, through his poisoning, he manages to escape possible torture in prison and exert some final control over his fate. Tacitus, however, destroys such an interpretation when he states that Agrippa was seized "by the hastened hands of the lictors" (*festinates lictorum manibus*: Tac. Ann. 6.40.1). Francesca Santoro L'Hoir has argued that words associated with haste, including *festinare*, appear

throughout the *Annales* in reference to poisoners within the imperial family.<sup>84</sup> There is a significant difference between this scene and those that she identifies, namely in that Agrippa is not a member of the imperial household, but even so, an audience likely would have noticed the connection between poison and haste. As a result, the appearance of the word *festinare* casts Agrippa as a victim of murder, not as a suicide. Presenting the *eques* in this way snatches away any agency he might have had, as even in his last defiant act, he can be nothing more than a passive victim.

Most condemning, however, is what the lictors do to Agrippa after they seize him. As mentioned above, they bring the man's body to prison and proceed to hang it. Tacitus makes it clear that Agrippa has already died before this point, noting that he is "full of death" (*moribundus*) and "lifeless" (*exanimis*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.40.1). Thus, the lictors' actions should not be viewed as a desperate attempt to kill Agrippa before the poison did, but rather the hanging of an explicitly dead man. The inclusion of this detail adds to the theatrical nature of the trial, as the hanging occurs purely for show, but it also serves to indirectly challenge the emperor's earlier decisions. Throughout the first hexad, and in the sixth book in particular, Tiberius has ordered a number of executions, all predicated on the idea that the condemned either represented a danger to the state or to the imperial family. And while the historian makes it clear that individuals such as Vitia or Mamercus Scaurus had no real intentions of harming the state, it was at least, strictly speaking, possible. The same cannot be said for a corpse. As a result, the hanging of Agrippa is entirely indefensible. It cannot have benefited the state in any way, and served only to satisfy the bloodlust and vindictiveness of the violent emperor. This execution thus

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<sup>84</sup> L'Hoir 2006, 185, 188-190.

subtly casts doubt on the legitimacy of all of Tiberius' other executions by showing that the emperor was perfectly willing to condemn individuals for no good reason. In short, this farcical hanging pulls back the curtain on Tacitus' Tiberius. All the pretenses are gone, and the aging emperor's cruelty takes center stage, delivering a bloody monologue that brings his debasement of the justice system into stark relief.

Not long after this suicide, Tiberius' life, and book six, sputter to a close, featuring a few more murders and suicides along the way. Perhaps it is not surprising that the end of the book comes here.<sup>85</sup> After all, where else could the *princeps* have gone after murdering a dead man? Tiberius' death need not be analyzed in detail for this paper, but it is worth noting some of the ironies that surround the scene. First, as Woodman has observed, Tiberius' last stated act is to ask for food, a request that is ignored, just as Drusus' were at the emperor's own orders.<sup>86</sup> In addition, the historian specifically states that it is Macro who gives the order to smother the old man (*Tac. Ann.* 6.50.5). The *princeps*, who offered so many other opportunities for Macro to commit murder, has ultimately provided one more. Finally, after realizing that his doctor, Charicles, is taking his pulse, the emperor makes a show of his health, returning to his banquet and staying even longer than usual. His efforts, however, are for naught, as Charicles informs Macro that his patient's breath is failing, and that he will die within two days. Like Vibulenus Agrippa, and many others before him, the emperor knows that death is near, but he can do nothing to prevent it. Just as others had to contend with an immoveable emperor, now the emperor must contend with immovable nature. These

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<sup>85</sup> Admittedly, due to the complete loss of the seventh book, it cannot be said with certainty that the *princeps*' death marked the end of the sixth book. That said, Tiberius' death certainly seems like a logical place to conclude the hexad, and in any case, it certainly represents the end of a major section of the *Annales* as a whole.

<sup>86</sup> Woodman 2006, 189.

three features of the *princeps*' final scene place him in the role of one of his own victims, as he dies pitifully, ignored, powerless, and betrayed.

*Sic Tiberius finivit.* His pathetic death is a fitting end for the sixth book of Tacitus' *Annales*, as he joins the ranks of men and women slaughtered without mercy to satisfy another man's pleasures. Such murders fill the book, and a grim tone pervades its pages as death follows death in rapid succession. But grim does not mean poorly written. On the contrary, the historian deftly weaves together these events, transforming what might have been a monotonous and melancholy string of disjointed episodes into a smooth narrative that offers plenty of opportunities for detailed analysis. By carefully arranging the deaths throughout the sixth book of the *Annales*, Tacitus provides a detailed character study that allows the reader to gain insight into the emperor's progression into even greater tyranny. In the process, he also heightens the emotional impact of his work, and looks towards the future by casting Macro as a new, even more dangerous force on the Palatine. The final book of the Tiberian hexad may be written in blood, but it still provides a treasury of things *digna cognitu*.

## Chapter 4: *Ibatur in Caedes*: Books 12-15 of Tacitus' *Annales*

While the first hexad of Tacitus' *Annales* depicts Tiberius' growing despotism as the principate became increasingly entrenched, the books treating Nero and his mother have a noticeably different setting.<sup>87</sup> Most of the individuals connected with the late republican champions of the late 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E have died, and Nero's accession seems to have been free from the legionary revolts that threatened Tiberius' early days as emperor. Furthermore, while Tiberius had a long career of successful generalship prior to becoming the *princeps* and had to contend with a still somewhat independent senate, Nero had no such history and came to the throne when the body had already been weakened by years of emperors. With these differences in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that some scholars have argued that the first hexad differs markedly from the later books in its style.<sup>88</sup> However, the differences between Tacitus' first and last books may be overstated, and a careful analysis shows that the author has not altered his guiding structural principles. Deaths continue to serve the same two purposes throughout the *Annales*, marking key points of transition within the narrative and highlighting the increasing wickedness of the principate. In this chapter, I analyze a number of deaths that occur between the beginning of the work's twelfth book and the Pisonian conspiracy, arguing that these episodes cast Agrippina as the successor to earlier manipulative figures, trace her rise and fall, and highlight Nero's increasingly brazen authoritarianism.

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<sup>87</sup> The historian presumably would have developed the differences in these settings over the course of the missing books describing the reigns of Caligula and Claudius, although this cannot be proven decisively. Even so, it seems reasonable to believe that the change would not have been as stark as the fragmentary status of the work makes it appear.

<sup>88</sup> See for example, Syme's comments about the increasingly less rigid annalistic structure (Syme 1958, 266) or Benario's observations about Tacitus' increasingly simple style (Benario 2011, 115).



These techniques link the later books to the earlier ones, giving the *Annales* a greater sense of continuity than the differences may suggest,<sup>89</sup> and building towards the bloody events in the concluding years of Nero's own life.

The twelfth book begins with the imperial court anxiously attempting to find a new wife for Claudius, who, Tacitus notes, was "unable to bear unmarried life" (*caelibis vitae intoleranti*: Tac. *Ann.* 12.1.1). Agrippina, daughter of Germanicus, emerges as the front-runner, and schemes to cement her position of power by marrying her son Domitius, later known as Nero, to Claudius' daughter Octavia (Tac. *Ann.* 12.3.1-2). Unfortunately for Agrippina's ambitions, Octavia is already married to Lucius Silanus, and thus her plan "was not able to be accomplished without a crime" (*sine scelere perpetrari non poterat*: Tac. *Ann.* 12.3.2). Agrippina then has Silanus accused of incest and expelled from the senate (Tac. *Ann.* 12.4.1-3). Not much later, she successfully marries Claudius, prompting the historian to comment that "all things were obedient to a woman" (*cuncta feminae oboediebant*: Tac. *Ann.* 12.7.3). On the day of her wedding, Silanus commits suicide, either because he had lost hope of surviving Agrippina's wrath, or because he hoped that his death would further rouse the public's anger against her (Tac. *Ann.* 12.8.1).

Silanus' death is thus the first to occur in the twelfth book of the *Annales*, and happens shortly after the book begins, drawing the reader's attention to it and suggesting that it holds particular significance. Specifically, the suicide allows Tacitus to establish Agrippina's characterization. Obviously, the fact that her first major action in the text

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<sup>89</sup> As the books describing the entire reign of Caligula and most of that of Claudius are missing, it is unfortunately impossible to say how the historian would have used deaths in the lost portions of the text. However, based on the fact that the historian's use remains consistent throughout the surviving parts of the *Annales*, it seems likely that he would have employed them for the same purposes in the missing portions, further strengthening the general sense of continuity within the *Annales* as a whole.

includes a *scelus* reflects poorly on her character, and leaves the historian's audience with little doubt as to what sort of empress she will be. Furthermore, as Anthony Barrett notes, Agrippina's decision to weaken Silanus' reputation through an accusation of incest rather than charging him with *maiestas* demonstrates that she is far more cunning than Claudius' previous wife, and quickly cements her role as a dangerous plotter.<sup>90</sup> Tacitus' carefully constructed account of Silanus' death thus efficiently profiles Agrippina, elevating its importance within the text.

Silanus' death also has structural significance, as it serves to mark Agrippina's ascension to power. As noted above, the account of the suicide occurs immediately after Agrippina seems to take control of the empire. It seems reasonable that the author would place this episode here, especially considering that Silanus took his life on the day of the wedding that formalized the empress' status, but it is important to note that another option was available. Tacitus had, after all, mentioned the man's expulsion from the senate a few chapters earlier, and there is no reason why he could not have added a brief note that Silanus would later commit suicide.<sup>91</sup> As a result, the placement of this death should be regarded as a deliberate choice on the part of the author, the significance of which seems clear. As I have argued in earlier chapters, Tacitus frequently uses the deaths of prominent individuals to mark transitional points in the narrative. An awareness of this technique subtly causes the reader to view Agrippina's growing power

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<sup>90</sup> Barrett 1996, 100.

<sup>91</sup> Admittedly, Silanus' expulsion and suicide did not occur in the same year, and thus one could make the argument that Tacitus separated the two events in deference to the annalistic tradition. However, Tacitus seems to have increasingly broken away from his annalistic predecessors in the later books (Syme 1958, 266-269). Furthermore, Tacitus' comments that he chose to relate the affairs involving Caratacus and the other British rebels in one section for the sake of clarity (Tac. *Ann.* 12.40.5) suggest that he was perfectly willing to forego a strict annual division for related events. Thus a temporal explanation is not sufficient to account for the historian's decision to separate Silanus' expulsion and suicide.

as part of a larger shift in the direction of the principate, based on the very fact that Silanus died immediately after she became empress. In other words, by delaying his account of Silanus' death, Tacitus transforms the suicide into a sign that the *Annales* will experience considerable change in the coming chapters. Like many before it, this death transcends its historical significance and becomes a supportive element of the narrative itself, bringing the reader to adopt Tacitus' own views concerning the importance of Claudius' final marriage.

The significance of Silanus' death, however, may be even greater than modern readers can know. As was mentioned in chapter one,<sup>92</sup> Tacitus begins his description of Tiberius' reign by declaring that "the first crime of the new principate was the murder of Agrippa Postumus" (*primum facinus novi principatus fuit Postumi Agrippae caedes*: Tac. *Ann.* 1.6.1). Nero's rule begins in a similar manner, with the observation that Agrippina prepared "the first death for the new principate" (*prima novo principatu mors*: Tac. *Ann.* 13.1.1). Scholars have long connected these scenes,<sup>93</sup> arguing that the parallel serves to present Nero as a second Tiberius. This conclusion is fair, considering the available evidence. But at the same time, it is tempting to suspect that Tacitus would have extended this technique to each new emperor, and thus, a murder would have appeared at the beginning of Caligula and Claudius' principates if the books describing them had not been lost. This conjecture is, of course, impossible to prove in the absence of these sections, but it is difficult to imagine why Tacitus would have wanted to link Tiberius and Nero alone while excluding the emperors between them, and the *Annales* in general tends

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<sup>92</sup> See pages 12-13 of this thesis for the discussion of Agrippa Postumus' killing.

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, Martin 1955, 123, Syme 1958, 307, and Barrett 1996, 153-154.

to present history as following repeating patterns.<sup>94</sup> Thus, if Tacitus initiated each new reign with a murder, Agrippina's actions against Silanus become particularly significant. In plotting to destroy her victim, she behaves just like the Julio-Claudian emperors, and the historian's use of the term *scelus* to describe her attack, while not exactly matching the use of *facinus* for Agrippa Postumus' killing, has a similar meaning and perhaps works to recall Tiberius' crime further.<sup>95</sup> In short, the death of Lucius Silanus may not just mark Agrippina's growing power. It perhaps serves as her effective "inauguration" as empress, equating her with her male predecessors. Tacitus' comment that Agrippina brought the state to "a sort of masculine slavery" (*quasi virile servitium*: Tac. *Ann.* 12.7.3) seems to be more than mere exaggeration. Her reign, by all appearances, is truly no different from that of the other emperors.

At the end of the twelfth book, Agrippina turns her power towards her own household, murdering her husband Claudius. The structural significance of the scene is obvious, as it serves to mark the end of the second hexad, showing that Tacitus placed deaths at significant junctures in the narrative. Less apparent, but equally important, is the way in which it recalls the death of Tiberius. Both emperors are murdered by a confidant, as the praetorian prefect Macro ultimately smothers the elderly Tiberius (Tac. *Ann.* 6.50.5), and Claudius' wife orders his poisoning. Similarly, Macro plans to kill Tiberius after consulting with the emperor's *medicus*, Charicles (Tac. *Ann.* 6.50.2), while Agrippina suborns Claudius' *medicus*, Xenophon, to carry out her plot (Tac. *Ann.* 12.67.2). Furthermore, Tacitus reports that Tiberius, after supposedly dying, suddenly

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<sup>94</sup> Feldherr 2009, 188-189

<sup>95</sup> Tacitus' style generally avoids parallel syntax and vocabulary, and thus the absence of the exact same terminology does not necessarily suggest that the historian did not want Silanus' death to recall Agrippa Postumus' murder.

regained his strength, filling the imperial court with “terror” (*pavor*: Tac. *Ann.* 6.50.4-5) and prompting Macro to act quickly. Tiberius’ brief and macabre revival seems to have its parallel in the fact that Claudius, despite the application of the poison, managed to remain alive, forcing the “frightened” (*exterrita*: Tac. *Ann.* 12.67.2) Agrippina to improvise a new plan. The similarities are evident. In both cases, someone close to the emperor kills him out of ambition, works with the *princeps*’ physician, and must react to the victim’s unanticipated survival.

But why would Tacitus depict these deaths in a similar fashion? Part of the answer may be that Tacitus viewed violent succession as an inherent part of the Julio-Claudian principate,<sup>96</sup> and it is, of course, possible to argue that the events coincidentally happened in a comparable manner. But the parallel also appears to have a narrative purpose. Specifically, the likeness of these two scenes casts Agrippina as another Macro. Presenting Agrippina in this way allows the historian to foreshadow future developments, as she, much like Macro, will ultimately be destroyed by the individual whom she helped rise to power.<sup>97</sup> The comparison also builds upon the earlier depiction of Agrippina as a wicked schemer. As I have argued in the previous chapter,<sup>98</sup> Tacitus’ Macro seems to have taken up Sejanus’ role as the Sallustian figure representing the corruption of the state, with the notable difference that the former was more skilled than the latter. That the historian’s account of Claudius’ murder seems modeled after Macro’s killing of

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<sup>96</sup> Tacitus’ views on the principate as a whole are complex and do not warrant a full discussion here, but in general I find the argument expressed in Percival 1980 that Tacitus blamed bad rulers rather than a bad system for the principate’s faults convincing. As such, I believe that Tacitus would not necessarily have seen violent successions as an inherent part of the principate itself, but certainly as an inherent part of the Julio-Claudian era.

<sup>97</sup> Unfortunately, Tacitus’ account of Macro’s downfall is lost, and it is impossible to say how the historian would have depicted the scene. However, based upon Suetonius’ comments concerning the praetorian prefect (Suet. *Calig.* 26.1), it seems reasonable to conclude that Tacitus would have cast Caligula as Macro’s killer.

<sup>98</sup> See pages 60-61 of this thesis.

Tiberius offers a clear sign that Agrippina, too, has now adopted that role, and provides another structural component that links the later books of the *Annales* to the earlier ones. However, just as Macro surpassed Sejanus, so does Agrippina surpass Macro. While both these men were ambitious, neither ultimately succeeded in winning the throne for himself or for his family, serving only as influential advisors to bloodthirsty emperors. Agrippina, on the other hand, is treated like an empress, as the historian inaugurates her rule in the same way that he inaugurated those of Tiberius and Nero. In short, the two primary evil archetypes throughout the *Annales*, the wicked emperor and the wicked minister, seem to have fused in Agrippina, who enjoys the power of the one and the ruthless cunning of the other. Clearly, events are not merely repeating themselves in endless cycles. On the contrary, they become increasingly villainous echoes of each other, as Tacitus, through manipulating his depictions of various deaths, creates a succession of master-murderers culminating in the empress-advisor hybrid Agrippina. With the murder of Claudius, Agrippina seems to have the power and the skill to drive the city of Rome into ruin, and the future of the empire has never looked bleaker.

With Agrippina's malevolent influence at its zenith, it is perhaps unsurprising that her efforts to murder Junius Silanus mark the beginning of Nero's rule and the thirteenth book of the *Annales*. Perhaps more unexpected is the fact that the killing serves to introduce Agrippina's two most influential opponents, Annaeus Seneca and Afranius Burrus, who attempt to mitigate Nero's more violent impulses. Immediately after recounting Silanus' death, the author comments that "[the state] would have proceeded into slaughters if Afranius Burrus and Annaeus Seneca had not stood in the way" (*ibatuque in caedes nisi Afranius Burrus et Annaeus Seneca obviam issent: Tac. Ann.*

13.2.1). The word *nisi* creates the impression that these men alone are preventing the empire from sliding into ruin, and succinctly defines their role within the text as a positive force to counteract the evil influence of Nero's mother. With this in mind, the author's decision to place their primary introduction to the text directly after a murder is noteworthy. As before, Tacitus uses a death to mark the introduction of important characters, extending this approach not only to morally bad killers, but also to more honorable advisors.

As for the details of the death itself, Agrippina chooses to murder Silanus "with Nero unaware" (*ignaro Nerone*: Tac. *Ann.* 13.1.1), fearing that Junius Silanus would attempt to get revenge for the mistreatment of his brother Lucius and because of the popular opinion that Silanus, rather than Nero, should have succeeded Claudius. (Tac. *Ann.* 13.1.1). The empress entrusts the killing to two of her subordinates, who poison the victim "at a banquet" (*inter epulas*), and do so "more obviously than would trick [the other guests]" (*apertius quam ut fallerent*: Tac. *Ann.* 13.1.2). This scene is rather brief, and perhaps serves to contrast the poisoners' lack of subtlety with Agrippina's more careful precision. At the same time, however, it acquires particular significance when compared with the death of Britannicus, son of Claudius, whom Nero kills a few chapters later.

Nero seems to have decided to murder his stepbrother chiefly because he feared Britannicus as a potential heir, a fear stoked by Agrippina's reproach to her son following the dismissal of her agent Pallas. Agrippina begins her attack with the suggestion that Britannicus would have been a better successor for Claudius, as the prince was "a true and worthy descendant for taking up the rule of his father" (*veram dignamque stirpem*

*suscipiendo patris imperio*), before threatening to rouse the soldiery in an effort to dethrone Nero (Tac. *Ann.* 13.14.2-3). Nor is this an idle threat, as the historian remarks that Britannicus' character "had gained [him] support far and wide" (*favorem late quaesivisset*: Tac. *Ann.* 13.15.1). Agrippina had similar concerns in mind when she chose to murder Junius Silanus. Specifically, the "abundant gossip of the common people" (*crebra fama vulgi*: Tac. *Ann.* 13.1.1) in support of Silanus suggests that he had the same popular support as Britannicus, thus making him into a credible contender for the throne. Furthermore, Tacitus' report of this gossip emphasizes the fact that Silanus was "from the descendants of the Caesars" (*e Caesarum posteris*: Tac. *Ann.* 13.1.1), and thus he, like Britannicus, appears to have possessed a more valid familial claim to the principate than Nero. In other words, although the instigator of each murder differs, the motivation does not. Both plotters feared that the target could threaten Nero's legitimacy through popular support and ancestral ties, and thus they sought to avert the danger through murder.

Similarly, the circumstances surrounding Britannicus' death seem to correspond with the few details the historian provides about Silanus'. For example, Nero has the poison administered "when Britannicus was banqueting" (*epulante Britannico*: Tac. *Ann.* 13.16.1), recalling the *epulas* at which Silanus was murdered. In addition, although Nero tries to attribute Britannicus' death to the youth's epilepsy, Tacitus implies that the more astute banqueters realized what had occurred, as Agrippina "was understanding that her last support was snatched away, and that there was a precedent for parricide" (*sibi supremum auxilium ereptum et parricidi exemplum intellegebat*: Tac. *Ann.* 13.16.3-4). Naturally, if Agrippina had truly believed that Britannicus' death was an accident, she would not have been thinking of parricide and likely would have used a less violent word



than *ereptum*. It seems, then, that Nero, much like Silanus' poisoners, committed his crime too openly to deceive the other guests. But while Nero's guilt was well known, there appear to have been no repercussions for the murder, as Agrippina never avenges the slain prince, and the historian reports that many chose to excuse Nero's crime, as they preferred fratricide to a potential civil war (Tac. *Ann.* 13.17.1). Likewise, although Tacitus implies that Silanus' murderers were discovered, he does not describe any punishment for them.<sup>99</sup> A reader could reasonably assume that the perpetrators would have faced some penalty, but the author seems to have left this point deliberately ambiguous, creating the possibility that they, like Nero, managed to get away with a murder that deceived no one. The killings of Junius Silanus and Britannicus thus have much in common, as the motivations behind each act were similar, both victims were poisoned at banquets, and while the murderers' identities were known, they appear to have eluded any definitive punishment.

In creating these similarities, Tacitus produces two effects. First, this arrangement emphasizes the ways in which the scenes, as well as Nero and Agrippina themselves, differ. Paul Murgatroyd, comparing the murder of Britannicus with the murder of Claudius, argues that the two events present Nero as a wicked schemer like his mother, although a considerably clumsier one.<sup>100</sup> While he does not address Silanus' poisoning, it seems reasonable that his conclusions also apply to it. Nero has clearly continued to adopt his mother's methods, but with less skill. Specifically, while only Agrippina's agents were caught, Nero was unable to hide his own role as the instigator of

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<sup>99</sup> Tacitus does, admittedly, mention later in the same book that one of the murderers, Publius Celer, was accused, but Nero managed to delay Celer's trial until he died naturally, preventing justice from being done (Tac. *Ann.* 13.33.1). Furthermore, Tacitus does not allude to that trial here, creating the impression that Celer committed the murder without punishment, which in effect, he did.

<sup>100</sup> Murgatroyd 2005, 98-99.

the crime, suggesting that he was not as adept a killer. Furthermore, the two deaths succinctly demonstrate a shift in the balance of power by drawing attention to the gaps in the characters' knowledge. As Britannicus' strength ebbs, Tacitus notes that Agrippina failed to hide the fact that she was "unaware" (*ignaram*: Tac. *Ann.* 13.16.4) of the plot. The choice of this word seems intended to recall Silanus' death, as, where Nero once was *ignarus* of Agrippina's plot, now Agrippina is *ignara* of Nero's. The purpose of this shift seems clear. Considerable as Agrippina's power was following the murder of Claudius, it has entirely shattered in only a few chapters,<sup>101</sup> as she now no longer orders murders, but can only watch them in ignorance. In short, through pairing these deaths and repeating *ignarus*, Tacitus allows the reader to follow the developments on the Palatine, showing, rather than telling, that the balance of power has changed considerably. In the process, Tacitus gives these deaths a structural purpose, using them to draw attention to points of major transition. Such a technique is highly appropriate for the brutal Nero and his ambitious mother.

The similarities between these death scenes may also add to the emotional impact of Britannicus' murder. The young prince's fate is certainly tragic, and Agrippina's reference to Britannicus as a future emperor seems to cast him as another potential good ruler who died too soon, much like Germanicus. But there is one major difference between these figures. While Germanicus held a number of important positions and was a successful general,<sup>102</sup> Britannicus died before receiving any real responsibilities.

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<sup>101</sup> Why exactly Agrippina fell from power so quickly is beyond the scope of this thesis, although Keitel 2009, 128 identifies Seneca and Burrus as chiefly responsible for it, a suggestion that seems believable. This of course raises another question of how these two were able to outmaneuver the scheming Agrippina so effectively, but that issue need not be addressed here either.

<sup>102</sup> In fairness, more recent scholarship has come to question the efficacy of Germanicus as a leader (see L'Hoir 2006, 201-202, Kraus 2009, 108, Williams 2009, and Pelling 2014, 71-78). These scholars make

Furthermore, Britannicus plays a minor role in the text itself, usually appearing as a helpless pawn upon whom other characters act.<sup>103</sup> In consequence of this portrayal, it seems difficult to believe that most readers would have viewed the prince's poisoning as a great loss to the state, as there is no evidence to suggest that he would have been a good emperor. Silanus' death, however, solves this problem. The historian notes that the general public favored Silanus over Nero because the former was "guiltless and well-born" (*insontem nobilem*: Tac. *Ann.* 13.1.1), creating an overall positive impression of the man. In writing Britannicus' death scene in a manner recalling Silanus', Tacitus subtly allows the youth to claim Silanus' virtues, leading the reader to believe that he, too, would have been a more suitable candidate for the throne than Nero. The similarities in these two deaths ultimately turn the murder of Britannicus from a family tragedy into a disaster affecting the entire state, amplifying it and adding to the emotional poignancy of Tacitus' writing. As yet another potential ruler is slain, the hope for Rome's future suffers yet another blow.

Following Britannicus' poisoning, a period of relative calm ensues, as character deaths become less frequent, and one man, Lucius Volusius, even receives an unusually positive obituary (Tac. *Ann.* 13.30.2). It would be wrong, however, to believe that this

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valid points, and I believe that there are good reasons to question how successful an emperor Tacitus' Germanicus would have been, but it is undeniable that Germanicus held far more responsibility than Britannicus did, and did experience significant military success.

<sup>103</sup> For some examples of this characterization, see 11.34, when Messalina tries to use Britannicus to mollify Claudius but Narcissus easily removes the child, 12.25, when Pallas uses Britannicus as a prop to try and convince Claudius to adopt Nero, Agrippina's successful efforts to remove Britannicus' tutors and replace them with men loyal to herself (12.41), or when Agrippina delays the prince from going to see his dying father (12.68). The only times when Tacitus seems to provide a positive characterization of the youth are when he claims, with notable skepticism, that Britannicus was clever (12.25) and mentions Britannicus' dignified song that enraged Nero (13.15.2). These last two examples do paint a positive picture of his character, but they are hardly sufficient evidence that the boy would have been a successful emperor.

section portrays Nero in a positive light, as several of the deaths in these chapters<sup>104</sup> allude to the emperor's various faults, but compared to the beginning of Nero's reign, the imperial court now seems noticeably more stable. But the reader knows Tacitus better than to assume that this stability will last, and begins to search for a sign that Nero will turn towards his darker impulses. The awaited signal occurs in a perhaps surprising place, as Octavius Saggita murders his mistress Pontia. Sagitta, after buying the woman's affections through lavish gifts, became enraged when she refused to marry him and subsequently murdered her, a crime for which he was executed (Tac. *Ann.* 13.44.1-5).

At first, this episode seems to be an odd curio inserted into the narrative, much like Tacitus' occasional lists of portents, but its context gives it greater structural significance. Specifically, immediately after stating that Sagitta was condemned for the murder, Tacitus introduces Nero's own mistress and future wife, Poppaea, in a negative fashion, referring to the emperor's love for her as "lewdness" (*impudicitia*: Tac. *Ann.* 13.45.1). The foreshadowing seems clear, and scholars at least as early as Syme recognized that Pontia's manipulative character and death at the hands of her lover served to portend Poppaea's behavior.<sup>105</sup> But the episode concerning Sagitta provides more than just foreshadowing. As the one who will ultimately push Nero to murder his mother and first wife, Poppaea's entrance into the text is of considerable importance. With this in mind, the fact that Tacitus would place a killing right before her introduction further demonstrates the historian's continued use of deaths as structural elements in the

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<sup>104</sup> These include the death of Julius Montanus, who was forced to commit suicide for defending himself against Nero and his travelling thugs (Tac. *Ann.* 13.25.2), or Publius Celer, whose trial for murdering Lucius Silanus Nero deferred until the man died of natural causes (Tac. *Ann.* 13.33.1).

<sup>105</sup> Syme 1958, 310.

*Annales*. As many before it, Pontia's murder serves to mark a key point of transition, hinting to the reader that the balance of power on the Palatine is shifting further. With Nero's attention firmly on Poppaea, Agrippina's already diminished influence over her son fragments, but a reader has little reason to rejoice. The emperor's new relationship seems to have grown out of death itself, hardly foretelling better days for the empire.

As expected, Agrippina does not last much longer after Poppaea's introduction, and the fourteenth book of the *Annales* begins with her death. Much has been written about this scene, especially concerning its historical accuracy,<sup>106</sup> but there are two aspects of it that warrant mentioning here. The first is Tacitus' comment that after Agrippina died, Nero "gave himself up to all [of his] lusts, which, restrained badly [up to that point], some sort of regard for his mother had hindered" (*seque in omnes libidines effudit, quas male coercitas qualiscumque matris reverentia tardaverat*: Tac. *Ann.* 14.13.2). This passage provides what may be the clearest evidence of the structural use of deaths in the entire *Annales*. Tacitus explicitly ties Agrippina's end to a major change in Nero's behavior, and seems to divide the emperor's reign into two periods separated by it. The function of *reverentia* as the subject of the relative clause further enhances this effect, suggesting that Agrippina's existence inherently influenced Nero, an influence that obviously would have died with her. In short, the historian pulls back the curtain on his narrative technique, allowing the reader to see the framework that governs his history. This armature is intimately tied to death, and the author's remark thus provides confirmation for the reader's growing suspicion that dying in the *Annales* has deeper significance than historical truth.

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<sup>106</sup> See Barrett 1996, 184-186 and Luke 2009, 208-209, who both find Tacitus' story unconvincing, or Keppie 2011, who attempts to gain insight into the plot by examining the topography at Baiae.

Agrippina's murder is also noteworthy because of the extent to which Nero relies upon others to execute it. As Keitel notes, the *princeps* seems largely out of his depth during the entire episode, panicking as soon as his first plan fails and ultimately doing little more than ordering the killing.<sup>107</sup> It is not difficult to see why she has come to this conclusion. Tacitus presents Poppaea as the one pushing Nero to commit the murder (Tac. *Ann.* 14.1.1),<sup>108</sup> and even after he resolves to kill his mother, the emperor seems completely at a loss for how to do so until his freedman Anicetus formulates a plan (14.3.2-3). When Agrippina survives the freedman's trick, Nero appears no more competent, histrionically declaring that he had no way to survive Agrippina's revenge "unless Seneca and Burrus [could devise] something" (*nisi quid Burrus et Seneca*: Tac. *Ann.* 14.7.2).<sup>109</sup> The emperor's phrasing presents him as completely helpless. The word *nisi* suggests that Nero is not even trying to solve his own problems, as he seems unable to conceive of a plan that does not come from his advisors. In a similar manner, the indefinite pronoun *quid* creates the impression that Nero is blindly grasping for any possible means of escape, with no idea as to what that might be. Even after Seneca and Burrus defer the issue to Anicetus, who successfully kills Agrippina, Nero still appears dependent upon others, spending the night in terrified silence while Burrus and the emperor's other friends work to win him the support of the soldiers and people (Tac. *Ann.* 14.10.1). Evidently, while Nero may be a murderer, he is not a plotter. He contributes

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<sup>107</sup> Keitel 2009, 128-130.

<sup>108</sup> Poppaea's involvement in this scene is somewhat odd, as she had known Nero for a remarkably short time to have enough influence over him to convince him to commit parricide. In fact, Barrett thinks that Tacitus' reliance on this explanation is evidence that the historian himself had no idea why Nero killed his mother (Barrett 1996, 181). That may be true, but in any case, it is clear that Tacitus wanted to portray the impetus for the murder as another individual, not Nero himself.

<sup>109</sup> There is no verb for this clause, but it seems reasonable that the historian intended a word like "devise" here. Woodman, for comparison opted to translate the clause as "unless Burrus and Seneca came up with something" (Woodman 2004, 277-278), and it seems likely that Tacitus would have wanted the reader to supply some word for planning.

nothing to the scheme but blind panic, and appears more foolish than threatening. In time, this will change as the *princeps* becomes more skilled at killing, but for the moment, the death of Agrippina provides a comparandum for Nero's future murders. He is willing, but ultimately an amateur, and any further development in his proficiency can only be regarded as an additional blight upon the state.

Once Agrippina has been killed, the narrative enters another period with relatively few citizen deaths, as the author treats Nero's distressing personal habits, Corbulo's successes in the east, and Boudicca's rebellion. It is perhaps unsurprising that there would be less bloodshed following the death of the scheming Agrippina, but again, there is little in the text to suggest that this period truly represents an improvement in Nero's character. For example, the historian states that the emperor's deeds caused "shameful acts and disgrace to grow" (*gliscere flagitia et infamia*: Tac. *Ann.* 14.15.3), and one of his freedmen replaces the general who defeated Boudicca, mistreating the soldiers and looking ridiculous in front of the natives (Tac. *Ann.* 14.39.1-2). In other words, this section is more accurately described as a deferment of Nero's growing despotism rather than an abatement of it, and a reader has no reason to doubt that the emperor's violent character will reassert itself.

The expected reassertion occurs not much after the end of Boudicca's rebellion, when Afranius Burrus dies. Tacitus presents this episode as exceedingly important, stating that "the death of Burrus shattered the power of Seneca" (*mors Burri infregit Senecae potentiam*: Tac. *Ann.* 14.52.1). Significantly, the historian makes the death itself, *mors*, the subject of this sentence. In the process, he explicitly casts it as the principal factor in changing the imperial court's balance of power, providing further

evidence that Tacitus viewed deaths as instigating key moments of transition within the narrative.

Nero's role in this scene also warrants examination. Tacitus dutifully reports that the general opinion was divided over whether Nero committed the murder or not, but his coverage is far from impartial. He describes the theory that Burrus died by illness with only 15 words, but provides an extended 32-word anecdote supporting the idea that the praetorian prefect was murdered (Tac. *Ann.* 14.51.1).<sup>110</sup> In devoting twice as much space to the supposition that Nero murdered Burrus, Tacitus predisposes the reader to believe that the emperor was indeed responsible.<sup>111</sup> With this in mind, Nero seems considerably more adept at killing than he was before. Supposedly, Burrus had contracted an ailment of the throat, and a suborned doctor, working at Nero's orders, applied poison in the guise of a remedy (Tac. *Ann.* 14.51.1). While Burrus did perceive this (Tac. *Ann.* 14.51.1), he was evidently unable to stop the poisoning. Overall, the plot seems clever and well planned, and, unlike the disastrous efforts to kill Agrippina, the *princeps*' scheme succeeded on its first attempt. Clearly, this is no longer the same Nero begging his advisors for advice and cowering in fear. Over the course of the fourteenth book, he has continued to hone his talents, devising increasingly sophisticated ways to murder his enemies. By manipulating these deaths in order to focus on Nero's involvement, the historian throws this development into stark relief, indicating that the empire is in increasing danger.

Nor is Burrus' death the last to occur in this book, as Nero brings his cruelty to new depths with the murder of his first wife, Octavia. In a detailed analysis of this event,

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<sup>110</sup> I have used the text printed in Woodcock, 1971 for this count.

<sup>111</sup> Sullivan 1976, 318-319.



Murgatroyd argues that it is particularly savage even for Nero,<sup>112</sup> and thus, I shall add only two points about it here. The first is its placement at the end of the book. This position emphasizes it, suggesting that it represents an important moment in the narrative. The second is to add context to Murgatroyd's observation. As has been shown in the preceding pages, the Neronian books illustrate an emperor steadily advancing to greater degrees of villainy. As a result, the barbarous killing of Octavia should not be regarded as a freak period of intense violence, but rather as only a local extreme in Nero's descent into tyranny. The emperor continues to decline, and Tacitus' audience can only expect further, and greater, cruelty.

After Octavia's shocking execution, however, the author seems to give the reader a reprieve, as the fifteenth book of the *Annales* includes almost no named citizen deaths until its discussion of the Pisonian conspiracy.<sup>113</sup> However, the death of Torquatus Silanus provides one particularly noticeable blemish on this period. This man aroused Nero's suspicions because he was well connected to the Julian line and a direct descendant of Augustus (Tac. *Ann.* 15.35.1). Tacitus presents the charges leveled against him as entirely false, claiming that "accusers were ordered" (*iussi accusatores*: Tac. *Ann.* 15.35.2) to charge Torquatus with plotting to overthrow the emperor, ultimately driving him to suicide. Naturally, if the defendant were truly guilty, there would be no reason to order accusers to charge him, and thus, the episode seems to be further evidence that Nero is murderous and paranoid, with one noticeable difference. Previously, Nero

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<sup>112</sup> Murgatroyd 2008.

<sup>113</sup> The only named characters to die in these chapters are Tarquinius Crispus, who was killed in battle (15.11), Nero's daughter Augusta, who died in infancy by some unspecified manner (15.23), and Torquatus Silanus, whose death will be described here. Notably, the execution of Christians also occurs in chapter 15.44, but none of them are named, and it is unclear how Tacitus' audience would have responded to this passage. Even if this passage is included, there are still far fewer than average deaths in this section.

attacked individuals who could threaten his legitimacy through stealth, using poisons or other more hidden schemes. Now, however, he brings his bloodlust into the open, destroying his enemies through visible trials. Much like Tiberius before him, Nero seems to have gradually lost interest in hiding his wickedness, suggesting that he continues to descend into tyranny.

Why, however, would Tacitus want to place this scene here? The answer perhaps lies in the fact that the fifteenth book has generally been free from crimes up to this point. By interjecting a particularly unfounded treason trial into a period of relative calm, the historian reminds his audience that Nero's nature remains unchanged; he is still, at his core, a paranoid despot. With this in mind, Tacitus' comment that "Nero was not even ceasing from crimes when among pleasures" (*ne inter voluptates quidem a sceleribus cessabatur*: Tac. *Ann.* 15.35.1) acquires particular significance, as it seems to apply not only to the emperor, but also to the very book itself. As these chapters leave behind the murders of the rest of the *Annales* and turn to more innocent topics,<sup>114</sup> it is easy to get lost in the pleasures of the comparatively light subject matter. But this moment cannot last. Tacitus' history is deeply intertwined with death, and a period of only positive material is a narrative impossibility. As a result, Torquatus' death becomes more than just a reminder that Nero enjoys killing. It serves as a flag, hinting to the reader that the true character of the *Annales* will reassert itself, and that death will return to exert its former control over the principate. This realization can only fill readers with dread, as they wonder when the tension will finally break. The wait is not long, as the Pisonian

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<sup>114</sup> Such topics include Corbulo's exploits in the east (15.1.1-15.17.3 and 15.26.1-15.31.1) and the passage of a law to prevent opportunistic adoptions (15.19.1-3). It is important to note that this material is not entirely positive, as the historian devotes considerable attention to the Great Fire of Rome (15.38.1-15.41.2) and Nero's plundering of the empire (15.45.1-2), but in general the absence of deaths and successful military campaigns would likely bring a sense of relief to the ancient reader.

conspiracy lurks just out of view, threatening to plunge the unstable *princeps* into greater *scelera* than ever before.

The sections of the *Annales* examined in this chapter might be said to show the making of a tyrant. Like a dutiful biographer, Tacitus focuses upon the young Nero's formative years, magnifying the malicious Agrippina and casting her as a suitable role model for the budding despot. Admittedly, once Nero throws off his mother's influence, he does stumble, clumsily ordering her murder and displaying a weak-willed uncertainty. But this uncertainty does not last, and the new emperor is quickly slaying opponents with ever-greater ingenuity and cruelty. As these changes occur, one thing remains the same: death. Deaths constantly hide in the shadows of these books, creating long periods of relative calm that are quickly shattered by a vicious killing, leaving the audience in a constant state of anxiety, as it waits for the next lightning bolt to split the skies above the Palatine. While these deaths may be infrequent, they are clearly building. By now, the savvy reader knows how to interpret the trends in the *Annales*, and suspects that something big is coming. And indeed it is, as soon Nero's fury shall blaze forth more strongly than it ever has, scorching Rome's citizens to match its recently burned buildings.

## Chapter 5: *Mortis Arbitrium*: Death, Power, and Post-Conspiracy Nero in Tacitus' *Annales*

While Tacitus' Nero was improving his ability to eliminate his opponents and engaging in increasingly public shameful behavior, the Roman elite's patience was evidently wearing thin. It gave way in the eleventh year of the emperor's reign, as a group of senators, soldiers, *equites*, and others sought to overthrow Nero, a plan that would later be known as the Pisonian conspiracy. The *princeps* would ultimately prevail and would remain in power, but the historian does not present him as unaffected. On the contrary, the failed scheme seems to have left a deep impact on the tyrant, as he fills the sixteenth book of the *Annales* with ever greater acts of savagery that continue unremittingly until the manuscript cuts off at the death of Thrasea Paetus. In this chapter, I analyze one death associated with the conspiracy, namely that of Seneca, and several of the many that fill the pages of the history's final extant book. Through the deaths found in these chapters, Tacitus continues to build upon his earlier portrait of Nero, as the emperor grows increasingly violent and the senate becomes less and less able resist his power. This process intensifies at least as far as the destruction of virtue itself, embodied in Thrasea Paetus, providing a fitting, if unintentional, end to the *Annales*.

Tacitus' account of the Pisonian conspiracy has no shortage of deaths, but for this thesis, only one requires investigation. This is by no means because this part of the narrative lacks depth. Indeed, much has been written about the thematic significance of the episode.<sup>115</sup> However, two features distinguish the deaths connected to the conspiracy from those analyzed in the previous chapters. The most obvious difference concerns the

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<sup>115</sup> See, for example, Keitel 2009, 133-136 or Woodman 2014.

number and frequency of the deaths in this part of the history. Between Epicharis, the first member of the conspiracy to be killed (Tac. *Ann.* 15.57.2), and the last ones, Gavius Silanus and Statius Proximus (Tac. *Ann.* 15.71.2), eleven other named characters meet their ends. Thus, thirteen individuals die over the course of fourteen chapters. Since these deaths are placed so closely together, there is little room for the historian to add much intervening material, and it is unlikely that any specific one would be able to mark a point of transition within the narrative. Similarly, these executions seem to represent the only time in the *Annales* that Nero had a legitimate reason to kill his victims. While one could argue that figures like Britannicus and Torquatus Silanus represented an inherent threat to his reign, the historian does not indicate that they were actively plotting to overthrow the emperor. The same could not be said of the conspirators, who boldly claim that “an end is at hand for [Nero’s] rule” (*finem adesse imperio*: Tac. *Ann.* 15.50.1). Whatever Tacitus may have thought about Nero, he hardly could have blamed the *princeps* for killing men who would have killed him. Executing the conspirators was therefore justified, and these deaths do not appear to contribute to the historian’s efforts to depict an increasingly wicked Nero.

This latter point only holds true, however, for members of the conspiracy, and not all of the characters driven to suicide in this section were a part of it. Specifically, Nero’s former advisor Seneca and one of the year’s consuls, Marcus Atticus Vestinus, appear to have been innocent of any involvement. Vestinus’ suicide primarily seems intended to repeat and emphasize the themes of Seneca’s, and thus it need not be analyzed here. I will, however, examine the particular structural significance of Seneca’s death. Before this significance can be discussed, however, it must be established that Tacitus did not

want the reader to believe that the former advisor was one of the conspirators, as some have argued that he was likely complicit.<sup>116</sup> The historian is careful to note that only one of the participants attested to Seneca's involvement (Tac. *Ann.* 15.60.3), and the accused himself denies plotting against Nero (Tac. *Ann.* 15.61.1). Furthermore, while Tacitus does report that some believed the tutor to be a conspirator, he introduces this view with the phrase "there was a rumor" (*fama fuit*: Tac. *Ann.* 15.65.1). Naturally, the word *fama* does not inspire confidence in the validity of this story, and if the author wished for the reader to believe it, he presumably would have attempted to avoid the term. Finally, this information is notably presented after Seneca has died. There is no reason why the historian could not have reported this rumor earlier, and it seems reasonable to think that he might have wanted to mention it when the centurion explicitly asked Seneca if he was involved. With this in mind, its placement here seems deliberate, and serves to make the reader believe that the man was innocent. By the time that Tacitus even presents the possibility that Nero may have had a legitimate reason to eliminate Seneca, the reader will have already read his *exitus*, believing that the defendant is innocent throughout the entire scene. Tacitus' audience will thus have come to a conclusion about the morality of Nero's actions before entertaining any doubt concerning Seneca's innocence, a conclusion that cannot possibly be favorable to the emperor.

The awareness that Tacitus presents Seneca as an innocent man caught up in the executions surrounding the conspiracy permits a detailed analysis of the structural significance of his death. There has been little consensus over how to interpret this

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<sup>116</sup> For this view, see Dando-Collins 2008, 221, although I find this argument to be unconvincing. For authors more skeptical about Seneca's involvement, see Syme 1958, 263 and 407, L'Hoir 2006, 201, and Woodman 2014, 117-118. Ker 2011 324-325 also raises the point that Seneca's death scene focuses on his role as a private, not public figure, perhaps implying that he was not involved in a public conspiracy, although the scholar does not address this point directly.

scene, with some arguing that the philosopher's final moments appear silly and conceited,<sup>117</sup> and others asserting that they seem composed and serious.<sup>118</sup> Ultimately, I cannot believe that a Roman audience would not have found at least some irony in Seneca urging his friends to follow his example while he was effectively being murdered (Tac. *Ann.* 15.62.1), but I am more inclined to agree with the latter group. Despite its humorous elements, Seneca's killing performs a serious function within the work. Specifically, it supports the author's depiction of Nero as an increasingly murderous tyrant, ensuring that the audience does not forget this trend even in a period when the emperor's actions seem otherwise justifiable.

Two features of this scene serve to present Nero's actions as particularly unjust. The first is the presence of Poppaea and Tigellinus, Nero's wife and praetorian prefect, respectively. Since their introductions, these figures have served as devils on Nero's shoulder, spurring him to various crimes. Before describing Nero's decision to kill Seneca, Tacitus explicitly reminds the reader of this role, stating that these two constituted "the innermost of counsels for the emperor when he was raging" (*quod erat saevienti principi intimum consiliorum*: Tac. *Ann.* 15.61.2). This is obviously not a flattering description, and implies that Nero's actions against his former tutor are *saevus*, as he would have no reason to turn to these two otherwise. Poppaea's comparatively long absence from the narrative further strengthens the impact of her appearance. She was last mentioned two years before the plot when she gave birth to a daughter (Tac. *Ann.* 15.23.1), and thus, her sudden reintroduction is particularly striking. Also noteworthy is

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<sup>117</sup> See, for example, MacMullen 1966, 76, L'Hoir 2006, 215, who argues that the suicide reads like theater, or Haynes 2010, 73, who addresses this viewpoint, although she herself does not support it.

<sup>118</sup> See, for example, Keitel 2009, 136, Turpin 2008, 390, or Woodman 2014, 117-118, who all point to Seneca's calm demeanor and clear preparation.

the fact that neither she nor Tigellinus seems to accomplish anything in this scene. The author only comments that they were present when Seneca's response was announced (Tac. *Ann.* 15.61.2), and while one can assume that they offered the emperor advice, this is not explicitly stated. In other words, they do not seem important from a narrative standpoint, and the general understanding of events would remain unchanged if they were unmentioned. With this in mind, Poppaea and Tigellinus become little more than props, coloring how the reader views this episode. Their very presence serves as a flag, confirming beyond a doubt that Nero's killing of Seneca is unjust and casting the *princeps* in an unfavorable light.

Seneca's forced suicide also contains pronounced allusions to Octavia's murder. The historian remarks that the philosopher's first attempt at suicide was unsuccessful because his old body "was offering slow means of escape for his blood" (*lenta effugia sanguine praebebat*: Tac. *Ann.* 15.63.3), recalling the fact that the soldiers' first efforts to kill Octavia failed because "her blood was slipping away too slowly" (*sanguis tardius labebatur*: Tac. *Ann.* 14.64.2). Admittedly, the verbal similarities in these passages are not particularly pronounced, but the ideas are clearly related, and the lack of similar events throughout the *Annales* encourages the reader to compare this scene with Octavia's death. A more explicit allusion can be found in Tacitus' remark that Seneca was finally "carried into the bath and killed by the steam of it" (*balneo inlatus et vapore eius exanimatus*: Tac. *Ann.* 15.64.4), closely paralleling the observation that Octavia was "killed by the steam of a burning hot bath" (*praevedi balnei vapore enecatur*: Tac. *Ann.* 14.64.2). In each sentence, the subject's death is related by a passive verb, with the *vapore* of a *balneum* serving as an ablative of means, suggesting that Seneca's suicide



was intended to recall Octavia's killing. As mentioned in the previous chapter,<sup>119</sup> the princess' murder was particularly cruel, even for Nero. In creating these allusions, Tacitus transfers this cruelty to Seneca's own forced suicide, prompting the reader to find it as savage as Octavia's murder.

Evidently, the killing of Seneca should be seen as particularly brutal and tyrannical, as he was not a member of the conspiracy, Nero's wicked advisors are explicitly present for the emperor's decision to order it, and the old man's death alludes to the horribly murdered Octavia's. But why would Tacitus present the scene like this? Nero's victim appears to answer this question explicitly, quipping that "nothing was left [for Nero to do] after a murdered mother and brother, except that he add the slaughter of a tutor and guide." (*neque aliud superess post matrem fratremque interfectos quam ut educatoris praeceptorisque necem adiceret*: Tac. *Ann.* 15.62.2). In reporting Seneca's comment, Tacitus firmly connects his murder to Nero's earlier crimes, presenting it as an inevitable result of the *princeps*' bloodthirsty reign. Naturally, this portrayal reflects poorly on Nero, but it also suggests his continuing moral degradation. The emperor has, in effect, surpassed ordinary murders, and must turn to increasingly violent and unnecessary acts in order to satisfy himself. Seneca's forced suicide thus serves two purposes. On the one hand, it represents further evidence of Nero's worsening character. But at the same time, it marks a key turning point, suggesting that the conspiracy has not softened, but rather exacerbated Nero's cruelty, setting the stage for the massacre that will underlie the *Annales*' last surviving book.

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<sup>119</sup> See pages 86-87.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that a death inaugurates the sixteenth book of Tacitus' history. The deceased is Caesellius Bassus,<sup>120</sup> who, after having a dream that the mythical queen Dido had hidden a mass of gold on his property, convinced Nero that this was true, prompting the emperor to send agents to collect the supposed treasure (Tac. *Ann.* 16.1.1-2.1). When this gold fails to appear, Bassus commits suicide out of shame (Tac. *Ann.* 16.3.2). The placement of this episode in the midst of some of the most violent sections in the *Annales* seems strange, and Syme even considered it to be "a light interlude after the Pisonian conspiracy."<sup>121</sup> Tacitus has, at times, inserted more positive material during particularly negative portions of the work,<sup>122</sup> but since the historian claims that Nero's belief in the bounty led him to drain the public coffers with extravagant spending (Tac. *Ann.* 16.3.1), one could question how lighthearted this account truly is. In addition, Suetonius provides a considerably less detailed description of this same event (Suet. *Ner.* 31.4), omitting aspects like Bassus' name and how the public responded to the news. Clearly, Tacitus has included more information than was strictly necessary, a decision that seems hard to justify if this passage were meant to serve only as comic relief. With this in mind, it seems reasonable that there is some greater significance to the episode.

Part of this significance is presumably that the efforts to find the mythical gold present Nero as gullible and foolish, and the author is careful to note that the emperor immediately sent his agents to find the treasure without any further investigation (Tac. *Ann.* 16.2.1). There may be more subtle importance, however, in the fact that the entire

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<sup>120</sup> Some texts write this man's name as Caeseilius, but for this thesis, I have followed Woodman 2004, 341 in using Caesellius.

<sup>121</sup> Syme 1958, 310.

<sup>122</sup> See, for example, the obituary of Lucius Piso (Tac. *Ann.* 6.10.3), which was discussed on page 54.

scene has mythical undertones. References to mythology and supernatural visions are rare in the *Annales*,<sup>123</sup> and the sudden appearance of a legendary treasure is unusual for the narrative. Also unusual is the degree of violence in the work's sixteenth book, which Bassus' death begins. When these two features are considered together, it is tempting to conclude that the introduction of legendary elements serves to mark how unbelievable Nero's reign has become. His bloodlust has, in effect, reached mythical proportions that are more fitting for the age of Dido than the age of emperors. Unfortunately, this argument is impossible to prove in the absence of much of the sixteenth book, and references to other legends towards the end of Nero's reign would increase the likelihood that this conjecture is correct. But even so, Bassus' story seems designed to catch a reader's attention, and using it to draw attention to Nero's practically inhuman depravity would certainly be consistent with how the historian employs deaths in the *Annales*.

After Bassus' suicide, the narrative launches into a lengthy sequence of deaths, with more extended *exitus* intermixed among them. Much like the sixth book of the history, it is at first tempting to view these chapters as little more than a baroque display of extreme gore intended to shock the reader. In fact, Holly Haynes has even argued that the sixteenth book is a deliberately uninteresting and disordered mass of killings that Tacitus used to draw attention to the irrational nature of the principate.<sup>124</sup> This theory is not without merit, and the repetitive nature of this section does seem designed to exhaust

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<sup>123</sup> I cannot find any episode in the extant parts of the *Annales* in which the author describes a mythological event in this amount of detail, as here he noticeably even provides a supposed motivation for Dido's decision to hide the gold (Tac. *Ann.* 16.1.2). In contrast, although Tacitus does mention the kings of Rome while providing a history of the city at the beginning of the work (Tac. *Ann.* 1.1.1), he avoids mentioning the legendary Romulus by name. Visions within the *Annales* seem limited to those of the Petra brothers (11.4.2), insofar as theirs count, Curtius Rufus (11.21.1) Vettius Valens (11.31.3), and of course Bassus. In any case, it is clear that this passage is unusually mystical for this work.

<sup>124</sup> Haynes 2010, 70.

a reader, but the suggestion that the deaths have no particular order is difficult to defend. On the contrary, they demonstrate a clear progression, as the murders and suicides in these chapters portray Nero's victims as increasingly unable to defend themselves against his fury. An examination of the *exitus* of Lucius Silanus, Lucius Vetus, Petronius, and Barea Soranus makes this pattern particularly clear.

Almost immediately after accidentally killing his wife Poppaea (Tac. *Ann.* 16.6.1), Nero decides to destroy Lucius Silanus, making the youth his first intentional victim in this book and the fourth Silanus to meet his end in the Neronian court. The emperor's reasons for targeting the man are absurd and only serve to lionize him, as Nero hated Silanus' distinguished lineage and youthful restraint (Tac. *Ann.* 16.7.1). Nevertheless, Silanus is convicted and imprisoned at Ostia, but the *princeps*, unsatisfied with this result, sends soldiers to assassinate him (Tac. *Ann.* 16.9.1-2). The young man proves to be no passive victim, and fights off numerous assailants with his bare hands "until at last he fell at the hand of the centurion, with wounds on his front, as though in a battle" (*donec a centurione vulneribus adversis tamquam in pugna caderet*: Tac. *Ann.* 16.9.2). Clearly, Silanus has lived up to his noble introduction. The verb used to describe his death, *caderet*, is in the active voice, but the historian could have used a passive verb like *extingueretur*. The active verb shows that Silanus is taking the initiative and controlling the scene, rather than passively accepting his fate. Similarly, the specific mention of a *pugna* and front facing wounds casts Nero's target as a courageous soldier standing alone against numerous enemies,<sup>125</sup> turning his death into a scene from heroic epic. In short, Lucius Silanus seems to take resistance against Nero's murders to its

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<sup>125</sup> Compare, for example, Tacitus' account of the death of Decrius (Tac. *Ann.* 3.20.2) who dies while facing Tacfarinas' attack by himself. Notably, the historian says that this soldier also fought *donec caderet*, suggesting that the phrasing perhaps would have had particular military connotations for Tacitus' audience.

logical extreme, choosing to physically fight the emperor's assassins. As his death is the first of many to occur after Poppaea's, it sets a high bar for the behavior of the *princeps*' other victims. For the moment, at least, Rome's senate cannot stop Nero, but they are hardly cowed by him either.

Directly after Silanus' killing, Nero sets his sights on Lucius Vetus. His reasons are equally foolish, as Vetus' presence reminds him that he killed the man's son-in law, and the emperor's case relies upon testimony from a figure whom Vetus himself had imprisoned for crimes (Tac. *Ann.* 16.10.1-2). Upon learning that Nero accepted this biased testimony, the accused retired to his property in Formia, which the emperor surrounded with soldiers (Tac. *Ann.* 16.10.2-3). Obviously, this does not bode well for Vetus, and one might expect that he would decide to commit suicide at this point. But he does not. Instead, his daughter, "with her father encouraging it" (*hortante patre*: Tac. *Ann.* 16.10.4), goes to Naples to assert her father's innocence, defending him with a ferocity that Tacitus believes is unusual for a woman. Much like Silanus, Vetus does not accede to his own murder. The detail that he encouraged his daughter to speak on his behalf presents the man as an integral part of his own defense. This defense is decidedly spirited, not pathetic or desperate, as Vetus' daughter displays a courage that the historian finds amazing. Vetus stops short of the physical resistance that Silanus offered, but he still directly challenges the emperor's efforts to kill him.

These impassioned pleas fall uselessly on Nero's ears, however, and the senate prepares to convict the defendant (Tac. *Ann.* 16.11.1). It is at this moment that the man decides to commit suicide, but not before defying the *princeps* one more time. As his friends advise him to name the emperor as one of his heirs, he refuses "so that he would

not spoil a life lived most closely to freedom with servitude at the end” (*ne vitam proxime libertatem actam novissimo servitio foedaret*: Tac. *Ann.* 16.11.1). These references to *libertas* and *servitium* give his decision decidedly moralistic undertones,<sup>126</sup> as does the word *foedare*, creating the impression that his refusal to make Nero an heir represents a bold act of resistance. Afterward, Vetus, together with his mother and daughter, takes his own life, presenting a positive *exitus* that seems to be watched over by Fortune itself (Tac. *Ann.* 16.11.2).<sup>127</sup> The message is clear. In refusing to act like one of the emperor’s sycophants, Vetus displayed strong moral courage, and was thus able to face his death in a brave manner. Taken together with Silanus’ killing, the episode creates a coherent picture of how Rome’s elite responds to the emperor’s murders. They have not been reduced to total *servitium*, and they actively search for ways to defy Nero’s savage commands. But at the same time, what was once physical resistance has shifted to less direct forms, and the capacity to foil the *princeps*’ schemes seems to be slipping away.

The following year brings another *exitus* as Petronius, generally believed to have been the author of the *Satyricon*,<sup>128</sup> is compelled to commit suicide. The scene is complicated, presenting an apparently ambiguous sketch of the man’s character, and likely held some greater thematic significance.<sup>129</sup> Further complicating matters is the fact that the account of the death seems designed to echo the *Satyricon*,<sup>130</sup> perhaps partially

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<sup>126</sup> For a discussion of these concepts and how Tacitus felt that they related to the principate, see Percival 1980.

<sup>127</sup> I have followed Woodman 2004, 345 in my assessment that Fortune should be capitalized in this instance. I believe that this is justified, in that *fortuna* is the subject of the sentence’s verb, but regardless of whether one believes that this should be the goddess or the concept, it is clear that the historian implies that some larger force was assisting Vetus and his family here.

<sup>128</sup> E. Courtney, *A Companion to Petronius* (2001), as cited through Woodman 2004, 349.

<sup>129</sup> See, for example, Haynes 2010, in which the author reads Petronius’ death as making broader comments about the interactions between power and narrativity in the principate.

<sup>130</sup> Ker 2011, 324.

accounting for the way in which Tacitus chose to represent it. Whatever thematic importance the historian intended, a careful analysis of this scene from a structural standpoint shows that it continues the pattern mentioned above. Specifically, Petronius does not resist Nero's attempt to murder him to the extent that Silanus and Vetus did, but opposes the emperor more than Barea Soranus ultimately will.

The historian reports that Petronius, although primarily occupying himself with pleasures, did not acquire a reputation as a spendthrift, but rather came to be known as refined and tasteful (Tac. *Ann.* 16.18.1). Such a reputation made him a close friend of Nero, angering Tigellinus and leading the praetorian prefect to convince the emperor that Petronius was plotting against him (Tac. *Ann.* 16.18.2-3). This plan works, and the *princeps* has Petronius detained at Cumae (Tac. *Ann.* 16.19.1). It is at this point that Nero's victim differs from his predecessors in this book. Once he realizes what has happened, Petronius "did not further bear delays of fear or hope" (*nec tulit ultra timoris aut spei moras*: Tac. *Ann.* 16.19.1), opting to commit suicide without appealing to the emperor. Admittedly, the historian is careful to note that Petronius did not end his life in a hasty fashion (Tac. *Ann.* 16.19.2), but the construction *nec moras* suggests that he did not attempt to fend off his own death in the way that the others had. That the sentence describing his decision to take his own life occurs immediately after the one stating that he was detained further emphasizes his speed in killing himself, creating the impression that his choice to commit suicide was almost instantaneous. This change in turn reflects poorly on Nero. Vetus would not have sent his daughter to the emperor, nor would she have gone to such great efforts to defend her father, if either had believed that Nero was entirely inflexible. By the time of Petronius' death, this is evidently no longer the case,

as a close confidant like Petronius would presumably have a deep understanding of the emperor's nature. Escape from the *princeps*' fury is now acknowledged as impossible, and men like Petronius felt no reason to even try.

As awful as this revelation is, Petronius still manages to wrest some control of his fate from Nero. Notably, he did not flatter the emperor or Tigellinus in his will, instead sending a list of Nero's crimes and sexual deviancies to the *princeps* (Tac. *Ann.* 16.19.3). This action naturally recalls Vetus' abstention from flattery and admits Petronius to the ranks of those *nobiles* who rejected sycophancy, although it does lack the moralistic undertones of Vetus' refusal and sending a list of Nero's crimes could be interpreted as vindictive or petty. Equally important is the fact that Petronius also "broke his ring, so that it could not be used later to make danger [for others]." (*fregitque anulum ne mox usui esset ad facienda pericula*: Tac. *Ann.* 16.19.3). In doing this, Nero's victim manages to reassert some degree of control over his own story, as the emperor is no longer able to use Petronius' death in order to craft a narrative that suits his own designs. The inclusion of a purpose clause explaining his motivation demonstrates that this was Petronius' explicit intent, indicating that he was keenly aware of how his actions could stymie future plotting on Nero's part. In sum, this death seems to represent a period of transition within this book. On the one hand, the situation in Rome is undoubtedly worse, as the emperor's victims give up any hope of preserving their lives. But on the other hand, all is not yet lost, as Petronius avoids flattering the bloodthirsty *princeps*, and Nero's domination over the narrative shatters with Petronius' signet ring.

This progression comes to its apparent apex with the death of Barea Soranus. Tacitus builds lofty expectations for how this man will respond to Nero's attacks, stating



that the emperor's plots against him and Thrasea Paetus were part of an effort to "annihilate virtue itself" (*virtutem ipsam excindere*: Tac. *Ann.* 16.21.1). Considering that the historian likens Soranus to the very embodiment of virtue, it seems reasonable to anticipate that he will heroically resist the *princeps*' plot.

But this is not what happens, and Soranus instead becomes another part of the pattern in which prominent figures become less and less able to oppose Nero. Although Soranus' accusers mention some political charges, the crux of their case rests upon the efforts of the defendant's daughter to consult with magicians about the *princeps* (Tac. *Ann.* 16.30.1-3). When she is brought in to testify, she begs the emperor to have mercy on her father, after "first laying on the ground with a long weeping and silence" (*primum strata humi longoque fletu et silentio*: Tac. *Ann.* 16.31.1). Clearly, this makes her appear pathetic, and her tearful begging is a far cry from the forceful defense that Vetus' daughter gives on his behalf. It is admittedly Soranus' daughter, not the man himself, who acts this way, but her speech in *oratio recta* seems to dominate this scene,<sup>131</sup> and thus it is difficult to argue that her actions do not reflect upon him. Soranus interjects as she speaks, asking that she be spared, and declaring that he would suffer any penalty in return (Tac. *Ann.* 16.32.1). Much like Petronius, Soranus says nothing in his own defense, focusing his efforts on the safety of his child.<sup>132</sup> The overall effect of this passage is powerful. Whatever *virtus* he may have had, Soranus seems entirely incapable of avoiding the emperor's fury, and makes no attempt to do so. The only stated effort to

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<sup>131</sup> Compare, for example, the speech of her father (16.32.1), which is not only reported in *oratio obliqua* but is also noticeably shorter, using only 32 words (as the text is printed in Furneaux and Pitman 1904), as opposed to the 65 that his daughter uses.

<sup>132</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Soranus' actions were morally wrong. On the contrary, they seem noble and I cannot imagine that a Roman audience would not have seen them that way. But the fact remains that the man mounts nothing even close to a defense of himself in the episode, further reinforcing the fact that it simply was not possible for the senate to resist the emperor by this point in time.

save him appears pathetic and arguably makes the situation worse, as it leads the defendant to submit to any punishment in order to protect his would-be defender. The ability to resist Nero has evidently continued to diminish, as attempts to do so not only fail to help, but actively harm an individual's chances for survival.

Soranus also differs from Petronius in that he fails to reassert control over his own narrative. From the beginning, this trial reads like a dramatic play with Nero as the producer. Notably, the emperor decides to have Soranus accused when the future king of Armenia is present, either in the hope of burying the trial, or so that "he could display his imperial greatness with the slaughter of distinguished men, just as if it were a royal crime" (*magnitudinem imperatoriam caede insignium virorum quasi region facinore ostentaret*: Tac. *Ann.* 16.23.2). Tacitus does not, admittedly, endorse either reason explicitly, but given his general distaste for Nero and the emperor's increasingly flagrant murders, the second explanation seems more probable.<sup>133</sup> The use of the word *ostentare* suggests that the accusation is a piece of theater, and casts Nero as a director working to ensure that everything goes according to plan. Between the dramatic appeals of Soranus' daughter and his brave declaration to spare her at the expense of his own life, it certainly seems to have done so, and the emperor hardly could have asked for a more theatrical trial. As mentioned above, in breaking his ring, Petronius managed to free his final moments from Nero's control, ensuring that the emperor could not use his signet to craft further narratives about his victim's activities. Soranus cannot do this. From the very beginning, he seems to be little more than a character in Nero's bloody tragedy, and his

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<sup>133</sup> See also Sullivan 1976, 315-318 for a discussion of how the historian implicitly supported certain alternative explanations by making them appear consistent with his overall portrayals of his characters.

horrifying day in court is reduced to a cruel play. Ultimately, he and his daughter both, albeit unwillingly, play their roles perfectly, and the emperor's control appears complete.

Thrasea Paetus' suicide follows the condemnation of Soranus, but unfortunately the text of the *Annales* ends in the middle of it. For this reason, I will not attempt to analyze what remains of this scene in much detail, but it is worth mentioning that Paetus appears to have a heroic *exitus*, as he discusses matters of philosophy and gives advice to his friends and family (Tac. *Ann.* 16.34.1-2). This episode does seem consistent with Tacitus' overall portrayal of the senator, but it also potentially represents a significant departure from the progression described above. Paetus appears to have been more formidable in court than Soranus was, as Nero resorted to using armed guards in an effort to prevent him from pleading his case (Tac. *Ann.* 16.27.1), suggesting that the emperor could not force him into a staged trial. Furthermore, his serious discussion of philosophy recalls the fact that Petronius chose to forgo similar conversations in favor of light poetry (Tac. *Ann.* 16.19.2). Thus, while the scene is incomplete, it seems likely that it would have been an anomaly. In the absence of later context, it cannot be said with certainty why Tacitus would have wanted to construct it in this way, but his depiction of Paetus as breaking the pattern perhaps served to highlight the strength and rarity of his opposition to the rules of the principate. What is clear is that this book is building to some peak, as Rome's elites gradually lose their ability to do anything but play the roles the emperor assigns them. It may never be known whether Thrasea Paetus was this peak or merely another step along the path to it, but I am inclined to believe the former. After all, what else was left for Nero to do after the murder of *virtus ipsa*?

When the sixteenth book of the *Annales* finally reaches its unintended conclusion, the modern reader may almost feel a sense of relief, as the remains of the book are not uplifting. From the beginning, the surviving sections appear designed to hammer the historian's audience with a barrage of rapidly occurring murders, with little material that is not in some way related to death. Much like the sixth book, it is easy to view the sixteenth as an exercise in voyeuristic violence, as Nero delights in sending a glut of Romans to their graves with increasing ingenuity. But the historian is no less careful or clever when describing these killings than he was anywhere else in the *Annales*. A close analysis of how the emperor's targets respond to his attacks reveals that there was a clear order to how this book was arranged. As it continues, the emperor develops from a distant malice sending his soldiers to kill spirited opponents to an all-powerful playwright controlling more and more elements of his victims' behavior until even their very efforts to defend themselves play right into his hands. It is, of course, impossible to know how or whether this progression would have continued, and Paetus appears to represent an exception to the rule, but at this point in the text, it is difficult to imagine a worse situation in Rome. Nero may have offered most of his victims the choice of how to end their lives, but to a reader, this seems to be nothing more than an empty gesture. By 66 C.E., only the emperor himself held the *mortis arbitrium*.

## Conclusion

And thus our survey of Tacitus' *Annales* comes to an end with the suicide of Thrasea Paetus. The text was, of course, not intended to finish here, but it almost seems fitting that the *Annales* as we have them conclude with a death scene. Death, after all, pervades the history, constantly lurking in the corners of the supposedly benevolent principate and leaving the reader with the impression that, even during times of calm, murders are never far away. At first, it is tempting to see this abundance of death as mere sensationalism, as the historian gathers the most brutal slayings that he could find in order to create a bleak impression of the Julio-Claudian emperors. But a close analysis shows that Tacitus' death scenes are written and arranged with a level of care that would be entirely unnecessary if they were supposed to serve as nothing more than exclamation points for an overall negative image of life in Rome during this period. With this in mind, the reader cannot help but dwell on one major question: why is Tacitus so fixated on death?

This issue has no single answer. Deaths do contribute to Tacitus' unflattering portrayal of the principate, even if this cannot account for the entire reason for their presence, and certain individuals were so prominent that it would have been strange if their deaths were not included. Some episodes also have thematic significance, and presumably the historian's own feelings about death influenced his composition to some extent. But even all of these explanations are insufficient by themselves, and death seems to have been woven throughout the *Annales*. That is precisely because it has been. Over the course of this thesis, I have argued that death scenes in Tacitus' history constitute structural elements, providing the foundation on which the rest of the work depends. I

have developed this theory through two subordinate points, namely that deaths mark key points of transition in the *Annales*, and that they serve to trace the descent of Rome's emperors into greater acts of tyranny. In short, by reading only the passages concerning death, a reader could still perceive Tacitus' main points, and would receive, so to speak, the *Annales* digest.

The first chapter of this thesis examined books one through three of the *Annales*, and demonstrated that the deaths in these passages presented the books as a sort of gilded age, with tyranny hiding under a pristine façade. Tiberius' tyrannical tendencies were evidently growing worse, and the second chapter of this project demonstrated that they burst to the surface in the fourth book as the emperor sought to undermine morality, the law, and religious devotion. By the sixth book, discussed in the third chapter, all pretense had faded, and Tiberius openly committed acts of pointless brutality, while enabling his new praetorian prefect Macro to shatter hope for the future by acting as a corrupting influence on the Palatine. The fourth chapter examines Nero's development into a despot, beginning with a focus on how his mother set a precedent for his scheming, and tracing his growing skill in murder from the twelfth book to the Pisonian conspiracy in the fifteenth. Finally, the last chapter, covering the end of the fifteenth book and the fragments of the sixteenth, demonstrated that after the conspiracy's failure, Nero embraced his worse impulses and turned his fury towards a Roman elite increasingly unable to defend itself.

This comprehensive study of deaths in the *Annales* makes it clear that while the individual characters involved may change, the purpose of these scenes does not. Over the course of the entire work, the historian continuously relies upon deaths to draw

attention to transitional periods, introduce new characters, and showcase the changes in his emperors' behavior. This in turn provides a sense of consistency for the history, as the reader comes to recognize that Nero is following the same pattern that Tiberius did. But it is a bleak sort of consistency, one in which death itself seems to embody the very guiding principles of the Julio-Claudian principate.

Why would Tacitus have done this? Certainly it is tempting to believe that one could extrapolate the historian's, and perhaps even Roman society's, views on death from this realization, but doing so falls beyond the scope of this project. I am inclined, however, to believe that Tacitus had a subtler, more subversive motive. By limiting the development of Tiberius and Nero's characters primarily to their actions against their targets, the author creates a situation in which the emperors are ultimately defined by their interactions with the very figures they are killing. In other words, while the *principes* might have controlled Roman political life and society, it is their victims who control Tacitus' narrative, forming the scaffolding around which the other events of these years are organized. To conclude, the *Annales* is at its core a story of empire, and thus, it is a story of emperors. But it is no less a story of their victims. In framing his history around their final moments, Tacitus shines a spotlight upon them, using their deaths to give them the power that they could not hold in life.

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