

The Emperor is a Joke:
Laughter and Mockery in Tacitus

by
Jason Lundgren

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Abstract:

Comedy and Tacitus are not two words that readily go together. Yet Tacitus, the most important Roman historian of the early Imperial period, used the satirical themes of laughter and mockery in certain scenes of the *Annales* to highlight the decline of the principate from Claudius to Nero. These themes are used to highlight the absurd and the growing danger that the principate is in. Three episodes in the *Annales* stand out for their use of humor and mockery towards the emperor: the first is when Messalina boldly makes Claudius a cuckold, showing the emperor to be a weak, passive leader, unable to demonstrate leadership qualities in the face of a crisis. The second is during Nero's eulogy to Claudius, when laughter at the fallen emperor's expense allows Nero to realize that he can rewrite the script and make his reign all about performance. The third is an episode that threatens to enter the genre of slapstick comedy: the episode where Nero decides to get rid of his mother. It is a scene infused with humor by Tacitus, showing us the absurdity of an emperor's plan and a principate entering a new realm of performance over truth. The *Annales* is a work about decline with humor used as the occasional—and therefore striking—exclamation points. Tacitus uses laughter and mockery to show how increasing levels of theatricality and incompetence are contributing to this decline, threatening to cause the very disintegration of the empire. Tacitus shows a leader in Claudius who does not know the script that he is supposed to perform; while Nero however believes that it is all about performance, coming at the expense of reality—to the eventual detriment of both himself and the empire. Tacitus uses mockery as a way to reveal the truth through the obscurity, and laughter is revealed as a threat to the legitimacy of power.

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Edmonton
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One last thank you to Quintilian for the quote I found during the research process which might make for a suitable epitaph on my tombstone one day:

Fecit enim risum, sed ridiculus fuit (Inst. 6.1.48).

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The Emperor is a Joke:
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Introduction: My Sword's Sharper

...Shouting that death was better than disloyalty, [Germanicus] pulled the sword from his belt and lifted it as though to plunge it into his chest. The men round him clutched his arm and stopped him by force. But...certain individuals who had pushed themselves into prominent positions, encouraged him to strike. A soldier called Calusidius even drew his own sword and offered it, remarking that it was sharper...

—Tacitus, *Annales*
1.35

Comedy and Tacitus are not two words that readily go together; he has the reputation of the ever-condescending conservative moralist. The most well-known historian in Latin literature is famous for his depictions of heroes and villains, betrayals and murders, political intrigue and psychological analysis of the worst faults and characteristics of early Imperial Rome—certainly not comedy. His *Annales* is a sordid look at an empire teetering on the edge of disaster, which can be tense, thrilling, horrifying, but as the selected scene above shows, it can also be surprisingly funny. Behind the supposed dry impartiality lurks a man well-versed in wit and humor. Perhaps this should not be overly surprising: the Romans loved to point out that they invented satire, and humor can often be a common element of that genre. But it may be somewhat surprising for some that Tacitus was able to mix so successfully satire with historiography, injecting humor to complement his narrative in certain places. Two satirical themes that Tacitus uses to great effect are laughter and mockery; he uses these in selected scenes to highlight the shifting power dynamics at play and the rising danger of disintegration in the early Imperial period. In the last books of the *Annales* in particular he shows the absurd with humor and

mockery, turning them into significant parts of his narrative. Laughter and mockery are specifically shown to depict the decline of the office of the *princeps* from Claudius to the reign of Nero.

Tacitus is a storyteller and he wants to draw the reader in by showing them the dramatic. Humor plays an important role in drawing the reader into a narrative; it highlights absurd behavior but it also makes a narrative more enjoyable to read. Tacitus does not deploy a lot of humor in his narrative but that only makes the cases that he does that much more funny and powerful. I hope to show in the following work that Tacitus often used mockery to bring out the laughter of the reader. Tacitus uses mockery as a way to reveal truth through the obscurity of power; he then shows how laughter is a threat to the legitimacy of that power.

The *Annales* is a narrative about descent, decline and the end of a dynastic line. In a few key sequences of this work Tacitus uses laughter and mockery to highlight this decline by showing the absurd. Showing absurd situations with such humor and mockery is a technique of comparing the present and the past, current behavior with the *exempla* of history. He uses it to signify passive, or unmanly behavior, unworthy of a Roman leader; he uses it to signal unauthentic or performative behavior; he also uses it to signify a transference of power or loss of control. He shows the danger of transgressive roles in a hierarchal society; this is why women, freedmen and actors play such a large role in Tacitus' narrative. This is also why his skeptical eye is pointed firmly at the roles of the emperors in this study. He uses laughter and mockery to show how theatricality and appearance are replacing the notion of good government. He uses them to highlight the

growing theatricality of the principate under Claudius and Nero by turning whole scenes into comedic plays.

One such comedic sequence happens early in the *Annales*, even before the reigns of Claudius or Nero; but it is a key sequence in which Tacitus previews the increasing role laughter and mockery will have in the later chapters. The event, partially quoted above, occurs near the beginning of Tiberius' reign when Germanicus is sent to put down the mutiny of legions in Germania¹. No character in the *Annales* better exemplified the traditional Republican hero than Germanicus, a man virtuous and brave, and a counterpoint to the emperor Tiberius, duplicitous, and hidden in the shadowy world of court politics. Tiberius represents the new world of authoritarian rule, while Germanicus a nobler time. Yet it would be too simplistic to say that Tacitus portrays them as good vs. evil: Tiberius is often shown as practical, while Germanicus' honor seems ill-suited to the new world he lives in².

This tension plays itself out when Germanicus confronts the mutinous soldiers. He first begins with praise of Augustus, the victories and triumphs of Tiberius, and the glory of the legions in Germania (*tunc a veneratione Augusti orsus flexit ad victorias triumphosque Tiberii praecipuis laudibus celebrans quae apud Germanias illis cum legionibus pulcherrima fecisset: Ann. 1.34*). He then scolds them for their disobedience to the emperor and wonders where their discipline went. The soldiers do not back down:

¹ (Fulkerson, 2006) p. 171. Drusus, meanwhile, is sent to put down the mutiny of the legions in Pannonia. "For Drusus, the men are difficult to control because of their emotional volatility, but Germanicus will face a very different problem, insofar as his army is seeking to do to him precisely what he seeks to do to them, that is, to control by means of emotional arousal: they have control over their emotions and the display of them".

² (Pelling, 1993) p. 77-78

they show him their toothless gums, their scars left from battle and floggings³. This is an appeal to Germanicus' sense of honor and justice—they have put in the time fighting for their country and received nothing in return. When there is talk of proclaiming Germanicus emperor he tries to escape. After his escape is thwarted, he makes a show of trying to kill himself in front of them (*Ann.* 1.35). Though Tacitus says that Germanicus must be physically prevented from accomplishing the deed there is a falseness to the scene: it is too theatrical, too designed for a reaction, created only to shock. The soldiers sense it too: they mockingly encourage Germanicus to end his own life, with Calusidius uttering the immortal words that his sword is sharper (*et miles nomine Calusidius strictum obtulit gladium, addito acutiorem esse: Ann.* 1.35)⁴. But the soldiers sense that they may have gone too far and they allow Germanicus to escape to his tent to compose himself.

Tacitus makes a conscious choice here: he could have easily written the scene as heroic and emotional, where a virtuous man is willing to sacrifice his life for the good of the empire and emperor. Instead, he completely undercuts this sacrifice by having the soldiers mock Germanicus and the external audience laugh, ruining both his performance and the tension. But this is no mere mistake on the writer's part; as we will see moving

³ (Fulkerson, 2006) p. 174. "From this initial moment of staged encounter, both Germanicus and the soldiers alternate in grotesque displays that seek to control how the story is told. For, like Vibulenus in Pannonia, the army is only acting: they are *not* remorseful. They are angry and when they seem to (*per speciem*) intend to kiss Germanicus' hand, they instead insert it into their mouths so that he can feel how many teeth they are missing".

⁴ (Fulkerson, 2006) p. 175. "This gesture, familiar from tragedy or, perhaps more appropriately, comedy (think, e.g., of the young *amator* upon learning that his mistress is being sold, and Petronius' Giton, who 'acts out' his distress at *Sat.* 79-80), replicates the men's own immediately preceding display in that it does not achieve its intended effect: some of the men 'come nearer and urge him to strike'; one even offers his sword, as being sharper. He has clearly bested Germanicus, and Tacitus duly gives his name: even the bit players deserve recognition".

forward, this is how Tacitus is serving the greater narrative purpose and showing decline in the principate. Undercutting the readers' expectations is all part of getting a laugh.

Germanicus is humiliated in front of his men, a deeply shameful occurrence in Roman society where appearance meant everything. He is humiliated because he is caught playing a role, as one plays on a stage, not real life. The soldiers see through this act of “Republican virtue” as a false relic of the past. Germanicus was a popular soldier who was one of them—if they actually thought that he was serious about killing himself they would not have jeered or mocked the situation. They were mocking the falseness of it. With his failure to go through with the act of killing himself after saying he would, it puts his previous words in doubt about the glories of Augustus and Tiberius. Does he believe in authoritarian rule or is he speaking of a time long past when noble self-sacrifice for the Republic was expected? Germanicus attempted to be their puppet master, appealing to their sense of honor, only to find that the puppet had no strings. While the soldiers mock Germanicus, Tacitus seems to mock both the failure of the performative role and the notion that “Republican virtue” is an effective ideal during autocratic rule, if such a thing ever existed at all.

Germanicus' failed theatricality was not a fatal flaw for his troops, in fact he ended the mutiny and the troops liked his affability, a trait he shared with Augustus; they also liked his confident spirit which they hoped translated into rewards of spoils from battle⁵. However, his failure to put on a convincing performance with the troops highlighted his number one weakness: his inability to fit in to the new Imperial system. Andreas Mehl says that for Tacitus, Tiberius' reign, specifically the rise of Sejanus, acted

⁵ (O'Gorman, 2000) p. 48

as the turning point for Rome, much as the destruction of Carthage acted as one in Sallust's history⁶. As Sejanus would show, Imperial rule under Tiberius favored those able to be secretive and plotting while acting out convincing theatrics. Germanicus' inability to do that makes him a dangerous counterpoint to autocratic rule. The external audience would thus laugh at the failed theatricality and the mockery Germanicus is forced to endure but would also be amused at the comparison of his antiquarian character to the rulers to come⁷. This shows how much of Tacitus' humor comes from comparisons between characters, but also between the past, the narrative present, and the reader's present.

Germanicus' humiliation shows Tacitus playing with the idea of laughter and mockery as an important part of his narrative. As the work goes on and the downward trajectory of the principate gets going in full, these themes crystallize and become more prevalent⁸. It is during the reign of Claudius, and then Nero, that we see the techniques of laughter and mockery serving the narrative in full force. Much of what Tacitus is mocking with Germanicus' humiliation is the Roman fascination with martyrs and their outdated usefulness⁹. A martyr wanted to portray themselves as being willing to submit to the ultimate sacrifice; but the very act is designed to put the focus on themselves rather

⁶ (Mehl, 2001) p. 147

⁷ Germanicus' dashing figure and military prowess as general would become part of the humour in comparison to his brother Claudius, the sickly future emperor.

⁸ (Fulkerson, 2006) p. 182-183. For Fulkerson, the Rhine mutiny shows the importance of performance, not just by emperors, but those around the emperor. She also believes it foreshadows the coming danger the mob will play under Nero with his "mania for things spectacular".

⁹ (Sailor, 2008) p. 13-14. On the Roman fascination with martyrs: "Their demonstrative non-compliance seemed to proclaim their commitment to an earlier age in which the Senate had held the world in its hands, and in which elites had far more extensive opportunities to distinguish themselves before the public and before each other". Sailor is connecting this belief with Helvidius Priscus and Thrasea Paetus.

than their reason for the act¹⁰. Tacitus had a conflicted view of martyrdom, but his criticism of them stems from their desire for glory and he wishes “to reduce their glory to a level at which other kinds of achievement could begin to compete with it”¹¹. These theatrical performances will only grow in importance.

The laughter I will be discussing will be varied: it will be explicit, as in sonorous laughter in the narrative directed towards a *princeps*, or it can be implicit, as implied towards the ruler, potentially manifested in smirks, or knowing looks, preludes to secret laughter in private. It will be explored from the internal audience’s perspective, those witnessing or taking part in the action, and the external audience, those reading the narrative. The laughter can be friendly, an implied agreement of a joke or a humorous situation, even of obsequiousness towards a higher power; or it can be menacing, used as a way to show the unfit nature of conduct. Laughter is a signal pointing towards incongruities of appearance or action and it can be a powerful unifying force to those who join in.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery then mockery is its stark counterpoint. Mockery is derision of incongruities often through excessive or exaggerated imitation of a flaw. Mockery can be done satirically in a joking fashion, teasing done to point out one’s faults to elicit playful laughter; but it can often be done to deliberately hurt and humiliate, to show these faults in order to imply superiority. It can be used to change behavior, but it is always a comparative technique to display a level of dominance. In

¹⁰ (Sailor, 2008) p. 16. “To judge by how these deaths are presented, then, what interested Romans about these men was not simply that they endured pain and death but that they did so for the sake of their fellows”.

¹¹ (Sailor, 2008) p. 17

Tacitus' narrative there is little difference between laughter and mockery; however, the humor comes from the mockery, just as the mockery comes about through laughter.

Much of where Tacitus garners humor in his narrative is from acting and failed theatricality. Shadi Bartsch explains that acting is an essential aspect of a hierarchical society, writing that “the idea that an unequal distribution of power between participants in any human interactions invariably introduces an element of acting into the behaviour of at least one of the participants”¹². Theatricality is a performance between both actor and audience confined in an unequal power structure¹³. Thus, theatricality “entails a reversal of the normal one-way direction of the spectators' gaze, so that they know themselves watched by the object of their view and respond accordingly even as the categories of spectacle and spectator lose all stability”¹⁴.

In the following pages I will look at three examples of laughter and mockery in detail. In each of these I will look at who is laughing at whom (often a deceptively difficult question to answer), always keeping in mind that there is usually a difference between what the internal audience is laughing at and the external reader; and how the actors, departing from their proper role, affect the wider narrative of the work.

In the first part I will look at how Tacitus depicts the emperor Claudius when he learns that his wife Messalina has married another man. Claudius reacts poorly to the news that he is a cuckold, certainly not displaying the characteristics of a strong leader. I will look at why it is important that Tacitus depicts him in such a weak and foolish way

¹² (Bartsch, 1994) p. 10

¹³ (Bartsch, 1994) p. 10. “As a descriptive model, ‘theatricality’ makes actors out of human beings placed in situations in which they feel themselves watched, in which their performance is subject to the evaluation of a superior who must be watched in turn to gauge his reactions”.

¹⁴ (Bartsch, 1994) p. 11

and if Tacitus could have written the scene differently. This section is one of the more humorous events in the *Annales*, coming from the fact that it is the aristocrats acting like fools, while the lower class characters have to act strong and decisive to clean up their mess. The event is important to cover in depth because it begins the transition to Nero's reign and offers a comparison to what is coming next.

In the second part I will focus on Nero's eulogy to Claudius. It is here that the transition happens in the narrative and the reader is introduced to the most important character in the latter third of the *Annales*. Nero is given the starring role in what should have been Claudius' spotlight. The eulogy offers Nero an important realization about the importance of laughter: that he can (potentially) write his own role without outside help. It also sets up an explicit comparison between Claudius and Nero. The audience laughs at his praise of Claudius, but who is really laughing at whom here? Are they laughing at Claudius, Nero, or Seneca, the writer of the speech? If it is the latter it portends trouble for Seneca, as Nero cannot say Seneca's words without laughing. I will show here what this laughter foreshadows and the political consequences of it.

In the third and last part I will look at the death of Nero's mother, Agrippina. Nero finally decides to do away with his mother problem but chooses to do it in the most theatrical way possible; he eventually succeeds, though he fails spectacularly in the theatricality of the event. I will show why it is important that Nero came to this decision after being mocked by Poppaea and show how this convoluted murder attempt reinforces Nero's theatricality. I will also focus on two events in the scene that happen to minor characters and show why they are so important: first the murder of Acerronia in the water

after impersonating Agrippina, and then the messenger who has a knife thrown at his feet by Nero.

These three sections show the importance Tacitus placed on laughter and mockery in the task of highlighting the progressive decline of the principate from the reigns of Claudius to Nero. In Claudius, Tacitus shows a man who does not know his role in the script, while Nero knows all too much about his role. Nero knows that everything is a performance and he tries to direct his reign as a director directs a stage drama. But he also learns what Germanicus learned with the soldiers and what all theatre directors eventually know: it can be hard keeping the actors on script.

I. Claudius the Cuckold

Claudius never did cut the figure of the ideal emperor. He was a sickly child who grew into a sickly, uninspiring man: crippled with a limp, hard of hearing and burdened with a speech impediment, in many ways his figure was the opposite of the ideal leader that Augustus had been so careful to promote in state propaganda. However, it was precisely this perception of weakness that allowed him to survive the bloody regime of Caligula and be proclaimed emperor by the Praetorians. Despite his infirmities Claudius was an intelligent, curious man; he was a writer of history and considered a good speaker, as Tacitus makes clear, if he worked hard at it (*Ann.* 13.3). It can sometimes be difficult to determine just what Tacitus made of the man who became the fourth emperor of the principate, mostly because much of his reign in the *Annales* is lost. But he does not seem to play nearly as large a role in the narrative as Tiberius nor certainly Nero. Claudius had a reputation for weakness, which the subsequent rule of Nero would have perpetuated. He supposedly allowed the wrong people to gain power, such as foreigners, and allowed freedmen and the women in his life to control him. Tacitus seems to agree with this criticism: that despite being emperor he was not the most powerful man in the empire. This is clearly displayed when his wife Messalina marries another man, making the emperor of Rome a cuckold. There is perhaps no greater example in the *Annales* of Tacitus using laughter and mockery against an emperor and no more obvious illustration showing the steepening decline of the principate.

The adulterous tale Tacitus tells is clear enough though its veracity and purpose is less so. Through chapters 26-38 of Book 11 of the *Annales*, he tells of the emperor's wife, Messalina, and her lover, Gaius Silius, deciding to conspire against the emperor

while he is away, and to make their union official by having a public wedding. They have a party afterward celebrating Bacchus, with seemingly little care in the world. During this, Claudius' freedmen become aware of the events and struggle with how best to tell Claudius and rouse him to action. They use two of Claudius' mistresses to relate events to him and he reacts with fear and indecisiveness. Eventually the freedmen are successful when he authorizes them to act against the usurpers, and he returns to Rome, proceeding to execute Silius and many of his followers. Messalina believes that she can still get herself out of this situation if she is only able to plead her case in front of Claudius. The freedmen—particularly Narcissus by this point—are successful in preventing this reunion. When Narcissus senses that Claudius will forgive Messalina he secretly orders her death, a deed at which Claudius gives a figurative shrug when he learns her fate.

The episode is certainly a humorous story and Tacitus takes every chance he gets to make Claudius the butt of the joke. Most of the humor comes from Claudius' passivity and inability to act like a strong leader and the inversion of normative social hierarchies. However, Tacitus is engaging in more than a little rhetorical embellishment here. The belief that Claudius was some passive character with no ambition and no ability to get things done is simply wrong. For almost fourteen years Claudius ran an empire mostly successfully (Tacitus even admits there were no foreign disasters under his leadership in *Ann.* 13.3), leaving both it and the institution of the *princeps* stronger than when he arrived. As Josiah Osgood says, "Claudius left his imprint across the empire, in Britain and Judea, to be sure, but everywhere else too, including Italy and Rome—through roads, temples, statues, decrees, speeches, diplomas and so on. He tried to acknowledge the needs of provincials, as well as citizens, in an empire where the two were becoming more

and more alike. For many of his subjects, provided they accepted imperial rule, his image would have been largely positive”¹⁵. He was an emperor with such unique ambition he even tried to perfect a language that had been around for generations, Latin, by adding new letters¹⁶.

Yet hearing that Claudius had a largely positive reputation at the time might be surprising for most people today to hear. Claudius had a decidedly mixed reputation according to our ancient sources that usually seems to swing much closer to “bad” than “good”¹⁷. Tacitus certainly seems to perpetuate this reputation; in fact, Claudius has a poor reputation today in part because of Tacitus’ depiction of him. He does this because Claudius really was mocked in his own time; for despite his noble bloodline he was somewhat of an outsider, which his physical ailments and trouble speaking exacerbated. From his earliest days these afflictions made him a target of laughter which he was never really able to shake even with power; the discrepancy of the disabled attaining the height of power would have seemed laughable and ridiculous in a society that equated physical deformity as a reflection on inner character¹⁸. But that is certainly not the only reason, nor even the main one: Tacitus crafts this depiction largely for literary reasons.

¹⁵ (Osgood, 2011) p. 256

¹⁶ (Vessey, Jul. 1971) Vessey contends that this is not necessarily to his credit for his interest in this and soothsaying in *Ann.* 11.14-15 shows that “The *princeps*, busily engaged on such recherche matters, is living in a world of naïve and brittle optimism. All was emphatically not well either in his own household, or, indeed, in the Roman State now subject to so unworthy a master” p. 394. Vessey is following the Tacitean narrative that Claudius’ fault of not paying attention to the important things brought about the Messalina affair.

¹⁷ (Griffin M. , 1990) There are major complaints in Suetonius and the *Apocolocyntosis* that Claudius often convicted citizens without a hearing and that “Claudius seems to have been less concerned to secure the attendance of the accused for the purpose of holding a fair trial, than to expedite cases even if a basic principle of justice was thereby sacrificed. But perhaps he did not even realize that he was violating such a principle...he may simply have been trying to lighten the burden of fiscal cases referred to him” p. 501

¹⁸ (Beard, 2014) p. 106. Beard credits Anthony Corbeill (1996) here for his study of Cicero’s attacks against Vatinius.

To see why Tacitus may be using laughter and mockery to depict Claudius we have to remember the beginning of Claudius' reign. When Caligula was assassinated there was no official or obvious heir. Claudius was a member of the Imperial family but nothing else had made him stand out either on the battlefield or senate. But the Praetorians saw an opportunity to make an emperor; they knew that by acclaiming a man not perceived a leader as imperator they were giving him both legitimacy and military force, and an emperor forever beholden to them¹⁹. The senate were not happy to be left out of the picture, but unless they wanted to risk another civil war they were left with no choice. However, the senate, and later historians, would have trouble seeing Claudius as a legitimate emperor, for "some individuals might have voted to legitimize Claudius, and legitimacy their votes conveyed, but they viewed it all as a sham"²⁰.

In the Messalina episode itself, we know that a wedding between the illicit lovers must have happened, since the other sources say so²¹. The wedding would be a powerful visual image of Claudius' public humiliation. So, we can be reasonably confident that Messalina was having an affair and probably wanted a divorce. The official version at the time, the public version of what happened, may not have been much different than what has been stated, without Tacitus' focus on the emperor's passivity, of course.²² Messalina was undoubtedly blamed for the ultimate dissolution of her marriage due to her immorality and sexually voracious ways—the standard criticism ancient women face who fall from power, in line with persistent stereotypes in male-oriented historical narratives.

¹⁹ (Osgood, 2011) p. 30-31

²⁰ (Osgood, 2011) p. 32

²¹ Suetonius *Claud.* 26, *Claud.* 29; Cassius Dio 61. 31

²² (Osgood, 2011) p. 210

But does this suggest that there was another way open to Tacitus of writing this episode which would have depicted Claudius as a brave, strong, and active character, a portrayal that is completely at odds with the one he chose to depict? Indeed, there was. Divorce would be a hit against an emperor's legitimacy, especially for an emperor who had precious little legitimacy to lose²³. There had been attempts on the emperor's life early on in his reign due to this lack of legitimacy; a conspiracy could well have been happening again²⁴. If a senatorial conspiracy was occurring, it meant that Claudius was in for a fight for his life²⁵. Tacitus' focus on the laughter and mockery against him could obscure the darker elements at play of insurrection and rebellion. Tacitus hints at these underlying elements but he frames the narrative primarily as an embarrassing family drama that shows Claudius' unsuitability for his office. If Claudius had been fighting for his life against treachery and won, this could have easily been framed as a heroic tale where his struggle saved both himself and the institutions of his country: where an emperor had been betrayed by those he most trusted, yet showed coolness under pressure, fortitude, and smarts to defeat the usurpers and save the principate. He could have received credit for not hunting down senators and creating a bloodbath which a trial would have brought out. It may in fact have been to prevent a bloodbath that the official version placed the blame squarely on Messalina.

²³ (Osgood, 2011) p. 213. "If, as seems clear, Messalina was attempting to divorce her husband and marry Silius, Claudius' grip on the empire was suddenly made more tenuous. Whatever other intentions she and Silius had, and even if she was responding to the perceived threat of Agrippina, that was enough to condemn her without a trial".

²⁴ (Osgood, 2011) p. 42-46. Early on in his reign Claudius apparently narrowly put down a plot involving Annius Vinicianus, Q. Pomponius, and Camillus Scribonianus.

²⁵ (Fagan, 2002) p. 577. Fagan cautions against assuming treachery behind affairs, as "It did not matter whether adultery by a princess was politically motivated as part of some dynastic manoeuvre or a plot, or whether it stemmed from entirely personal circumstances—it was *ipso facto* a political act".

1.1 The Marionette Stirs

Tacitus sets the stage for the upcoming episode by introducing the states of mind of the two lovers. He writes that Messalina’s “adultery was going so smoothly that she was drifting, through boredom, into unfamiliar vices” (*Ann.* 11.26). This suggests that Messalina needs an element of danger or novelty to be happy; the implication is that she is not in her right mind and that she was unable to control her desires—again, a typical charge against a woman in the ancient world²⁶. But Tacitus makes it clear that it is Silius who pushes for the marriage, making him bolder even than Messalina. Tacitus states that “fate seemed to have unhinged Gaius Silius; or perhaps he felt that impending perils could only be met by perilous action. He urged that concealment should be dropped” (*Ann.* 11.26). The implication certainly is that treachery is afoot, and that action is better than inaction; he is urging that they have a better chance of success by boldly challenging Claudius openly than remaining in the shadows. Yet whether they take bold action, or the opposite, merely the pretense of it, is very much up for debate. Silius further argues that “only innocent people can afford long term plans. Flagrant guilt requires audacity...Peace of mind will only be yours if we can forestall Claudius. He is slow to discover deception—but quick to anger” (*Ann.* 11.26). This is a key point which will play out over the whole episode: that it is easy to trick Claudius by a performance but that his wrath can be terrible once he realizes that he was taken in by that performance. Claudius has a reputation for anger and vengeance, but that reputation will be tested by Silius and his

²⁶ (Galtier, 2011) p. 199. Tacitus’ portrayal of Messalina suggests traits of a tyrant herself, a cruel, greedy, amoral, and cowardly woman who is the instigator of violence, her husband only the facilitator. “Mais elle est aussi dotée de certains traits tyranniques, et non des moindres : c’est une femme cruelle, cupide, amorale, et lâche. C’est elle qui pousse son mari à commettre certains actes de violence. Il n’est que l’adjuvant dans des actions dont elle est l’instigatrice”.

wife. Interestingly, it is Messalina who hesitates, not because of any sudden attack of morality or care for Claudius, but she wonders if Silius will reject her once Claudius is out of the way. Tacitus suggests that she only agrees to go along with it because “the idea of being called his wife appealed to her owing to its sheer outrageousness—a sensualist’s ultimate satisfaction” (*Ann.* 11.26)²⁷.

What Tacitus has accomplished with this opening scene is setting up the humor to come by showing how none of what is anticipated happens. The two lovers resolve to set out on a course of action and follow it with inaction. Though aptly described as easy to deceive, Claudius is neither easy to anger nor easy to provoke to action. The only time in this section that he is shown to be angry is when he is carefully provoked by Narcissus (*Ann.* 11.30). The external audience is now poised to laugh at the failure of both competing forces and the seeming pointlessness of it all. It also begins the story with a sense of theatricality. Tacitus starts the proceedings with two characters laying out the stakes and course of action, reminiscent of a Greek comedy. What could be presented as a simple conspiracy against Claudius has been framed with a comedic twist by Tacitus from the very beginning: it is framed primarily as an adulterous betrayal by a wife against her husband, and secondarily as a betrayal against the emperor and the *patria*. This makes it seem more embarrassing personally for Claudius rather than dangerous, making him a figure of mockery.

Tacitus is not unaware that this part of his narrative might seem made-up, or *fabulosum*, as he states (*Ann.* 11.27). It is an interesting choice of words, also suggesting

²⁷ (Joshel, 1997) Tacitus’ “Messalina does not simply engage in sexual affairs that bring disgrace; she seeks the resulting disgrace of adultery rather than adultery itself...Such excess connotes a collapse of social categories as well as epistemic ones: the top of the society becomes the bottom” p. 230-231

theatricality and storytelling. It is an acknowledgment that none of this makes a whole lot of sense; Tacitus is aware that in a city that knows everything about everybody the marriage would not be a secret that could be kept for long. He claims that he is “not inventing marvels. What I have told, and shall tell, is the truth. Older men heard and recorded it” (*sed nihil compositum miraculi causa, verum audita scriptaque senioribus trado: Ann. 11.27*). Tacitus is keeping his historical authority by passing off responsibility onto previous writers, siding with the incredulity of the reader, but insisting on the accuracy of his research skills. He is also giving himself permission to revel in the scandalous details of an incredible story. What is most compelling about the event is why they felt like they could get away with it. In Tacitus’ narrative Messalina and Silius got married in front of witnesses; indeed it is not especially clear how secret they ever intended to keep their relationship. Tacitus is careful to show that the couple seemingly has no cares and no respect for Claudius or the office he holds. This is both Tacitus’ way of criticizing Claudius as a buffoon, but also the newly married couple and their followers: these should not be serious challengers to a competent *princeps*.

The symbolic meaning of the union fills the wedding itself with internal humor. It is not just the fact that there are many witnesses with knowledge of the affair but now there are also witnesses to the solemn acts of a marriage ceremony; this turns the affair from an idea or rumor into a tangible object that can be held up as a mockery against Claudius. This makes the act itself farcical for the audience members, something out of Greek New Comedy. Tacitus does not go into many details of the marriage ceremony itself but he is careful to stress that there are guests present and sacrifices to the gods (*atque illam audisse auspicum verba, subisse <vota> sacrificasse apud deos; discutitum*

inter convivas) signifying that this was no charade or performance (*Ann.* 11.27). The event may be laughable yet the consequences should not be, for the guests must know the trouble that they themselves will be in once Claudius finds out: their presence gives the ceremony the legitimacy that a private act never could. The wedding represents a turning point: what was before private shame of Messalina's infidelities has now become public shame. The wedding audience represents consent for Messalina's new union and open mockery and laughter at the emperor's expense. It would also have forced Claudius' hand, for public shame requires a public response.

Public humiliation is a step too far for Claudius' freedmen and stirs them into action. What gets the freedmen involved is a threat to their power. Tacitus makes it clear that if Messalina had affairs with unimportant people, like the actor Mnester, the freedmen would have no cause to interfere (11.28). But marriage to a young rising senator with his eyes on the consulship like Silius is too dangerous of a proposition for the freedmen. A change in leadership would be a revolution which would endanger the standing of the most powerful including their very lives. It is interesting that Tacitus mentions an actor explicitly here considering who is going to be the emperor after Claudius. The freedmen ponder the threat: "While a ballet-dancing actor violated the emperor's bedroom,' they said, 'it was humiliating enough. Yet it did not threaten Claudius' life. Here, on the other hand, is a young, handsome, intelligent nobleman, consul-to-be – but with a loftier destiny in mind. For where such a marriage will lead is clear enough'" (*Ann.* 11.28). Soon another actor would enter the imperial bedchamber as emperor and represent ruin not just for them, but a dynasty itself. The talk of acting highlights the theatricality and performances that will grow more and more frequent both

in this episode and the *Annales* itself. Messalina is not acting as the dutiful wife she is supposed to, the emperor is not acting as the wise leader of his household, the wedding guests are not acting as loyal citizens are supposed to toward the *princeps*—all roles are in confusion. Adding to the confusion, the wedding is a dramatic visual event that Tacitus uses as a reason for the freedmen to rouse to action. It is a public humiliation, threatening the legitimacy of the *princeps*, and showing the reader how far the office had fallen. It is the dramatic impetus for Claudius' inaction to be measured by.

The freedmen are wary of Messalina. The danger comes from the power she holds over the emperor, for “When they thought of Claudius' sluggish uxoriousness, and the many assassinations ordered by Messalina, they were terrified. Yet the emperor's very pliability gave them hope” (*Ann.* 11.28). They know how many people she has had killed on Claudius' orders and they do not trust him to act decisively against her; they know they are lost if they allow Messalina a chance to have an audience with the emperor and defend herself (*subibat sine dubio metus reputantes hebetem Claudium et uxori devinctum multasque mortes iussu Messalinae patratas: Ann.* 11.28)²⁸. This shows that of the three main powers in the palace the weakest would be the emperor himself—the real power lay in the struggle between the freedmen and Messalina.

This chapter with the freedmen and the one after it (*Ann.* 11.29) do more than just criticize their growing influence in politics. At the beginning of the episode Tacitus says that he is only relating what he has heard from other sources (*verum audita scriptaque senioribus trado: Ann.* 11.27). This suggests that there was uncertainty in Tacitus' own

²⁸ The freedmen are recollecting (*reputantes*) on those Claudius had killed under the instructions of Messalina. This is most clearly shown at the beginning of book 11, when she organizes the destruction of both Valerius Asiaticus and her rival Poppaea Sabina (*Ann.* 11.1-3).

time about the incident, potentially even amongst some of the participants themselves; as members of a growing court “they fought for influence with the emperor, to advance their position or simply secure their survival. The result was a perpetual contest for the emperor’s ear, one that, at its worst, could degenerate into a welter of innuendos and allegations”²⁹. Most of the humor comes from Claudius’ ignorance of the situation but much of the secrecy and confusion of this episode could be seen as a function of the court system that the freedmen represent. Tacitus would lay the blame and mockery for this secrecy on Claudius for allowing both the size and influence of his court to have increased to such a level.

Tacitus writes of a meeting between Claudius’ three most powerful freedmen: Callistus, who was involved in the assassination of Caligula, Narcissus, who had planned Appius’ death, and Pallas, the one most in favor with the emperor at the time (*Ann.* 11.29). They originally wanted to try to turn Messalina away from her new marriage without getting Claudius involved. Perhaps things could go back to the way things were, with no one the wiser. But the idea was abandoned fearing that it would be the end of them if Claudius found out they knew without telling him. It is Narcissus alone who decides that Claudius must be told, but he enlists the help of two of Claudius’ mistresses to do it. It is telling that Narcissus entrusts two women with the grave responsibility: it shows cowardice on the freedman’s part to give responsibility to two women with lower standing than him, but it also shows the belief that Claudius can be controlled by the

²⁹ (Osgood, 2011) p. 212

women in his life. It potentially could counteract the power of Messalina if he is stirred to action by another woman³⁰.

The mistresses, Calpurnia and Cleopatra, tell the emperor the grave event that has occurred³¹. But he seems unbelieving for they immediately call for Narcissus to back up their story (*Ann.* 11.30). Claudius vacillates, causing Narcissus to ask him: “*Are you aware that you are divorced? Nation, senate, and army have witnessed her wedding to Silius. Act promptly, or her new husband controls Rome!*” (*‘an discidium’ inquit ‘tuum nosti? Nam matrimonium Silii vidit populus et senatus et miles; ac ni propere agis, tenet urbem maritus’*: *Ann.* 11.30). These are words that implicitly bring up the laughter that the wedding ceremony represented; it suggests the danger that the ceremony has of diminishing the *princeps* in the eyes of his three bases of power: public opinion, the senate, and the army. It also suggests the power that the visual has in laughter and mockery, that the physical act of the ceremony itself has made the mockery dangerous to Claudius. The focus on the visual is once again bringing up images of a play, where the ceremony was a play on a stage, witnessed by an audience. Most of all, Narcissus’ question to Claudius would cause the reader to laugh because it shows the absurdity of the emperor’s ignorance or indifference to the political situation he finds himself in.

The names of both mistresses stand out here, partly because Tacitus himself emphasizes the importance of a name (*id paelici nomen*: *Ann.* 11.30). Cleopatra is the

³⁰ (Galtier, 2011) p. 107-108. Galtier talks of six stages of *scelus* in Tacitus’ narrative construction: la naissance du soupçon, la préparation du complot, l’incitation au crime, la condamnation, la mise à mort, la reconnaissance du crime. The freedmen’s plot to stop Messalina is part of the second stage, while Calpurnia’s upcoming accusation is part of the third. “La courtisane Calpurnia se jette aux genoux de Claude pour dénoncer le mariage de Messaline”.

³¹ (Galtier, 2011) p. 139. This makes Calpurnia and Cleopatra actors themselves in the proceedings with Narcissus as director: “qui se livrent, dans une mise en scène réglée par Narcisse, à la dénonciation conjointe de Messaline”.

name immediately connected to the notorious Egyptian queen of the same name who brought disgrace to Julius Caesar, bewitching him with her lust for power and bringing Eastern greed and decadence to Rome. Queen Cleopatra was blamed by Augustus for having the same traits that Tacitus is now accusing Messalina of having: a devious, power-hungry woman, luring men into danger and getting what she wants with her voracious sexual appetite. She was a woman who caused such madness in men she helped start a civil war between Romans, as Messalina potentially could if her power was allowed to continue to grow unchecked. But it is Calpurnia who seems to have the more significant role between them, as she speaks to Claudius first. This is another name connected to Julius Caesar, as his last wife bore the same name. Suetonius tells of a dream she had on the morning of his assassination, where she told him that she saw his impending death and begged him not to go to that fateful meeting of the senate (Suet. *Caes.* 82). Tacitus has this Calpurnia warn Claudius of a similar disaster threatening him only it is told to him by his mistress and not his dutiful wife—indeed to have the threat *be* the dutiful wife herself would be a funny twist for the Roman reader.

The words of Narcissus and the mistresses act on Claudius' sense of shame, anger, and self-preservation, but these are slow to develop. When Claudius asks the most powerful of his friends what to do he receives the same answer: it is time to act. But there is a caveat: he must make sure the Praetorians still support him, for "safety must come before vengeance" (*Ann.* 11.31). Tacitus makes it clear however, that rather than vengeance or anger, fear is first and foremost in Claudius' mind. Tacitus says that he was so scared of the recent events that he always needed reassurance: "Am I still emperor?" he kept on asking. 'Is Silius still a private citizen?'" Asking such things and being ruled

by fear are hardly the characteristics of a strong, ideal emperor, and they further reinforce Claudius' absurd ignorance of the situation he finds himself in. Clearly Claudius does not know the script that a proper emperor is supposed to be reading from. How can an emperor not know that he is emperor? Yet Messalina and Silius are counting on this indecisiveness from the beginning of the narrative.

Those closest to the emperor keep asking him to take control of the situation; he is either unwilling, or unable to do so. Claudius' fear and uncertainty over whether he is still emperor, and his trip to the Praetorians would have amused the external audience as a reminder of how he became emperor in the first place. After Caligula's death, a terrified Claudius could not have known whether he would be spared or killed by the Praetorians; instead they gave him legitimacy and power, and thus an empire. History is repeating itself yet again, with Claudius running for support, like a scared child needing the protection of a parent. Tacitus is mocking both how Claudius obtained power and how he intends to keep it.

Meanwhile, instead of taking advantage of Claudius' inaction and panic while he is outside the city in Ostia, Messalina and Silius decide to have a party. They have a Bacchic celebration for the mid-autumn grape harvest. Messalina holds a thyrsus, or a Bacchic wand, while "surrounded by women capering in skins like sacrificing or frenzied Maenads" (*Ann.*11.31)³². When one follower, Vettius Valens, climbs a tree he says that he can see "A fearful storm over Ostia!" Tacitus uses vivid language to enrich the text here: you are imagining looking through someone else's eyes, while personifying a storm to hint at what is to come. It is also an amusing line: fearful storms are thought of as

³² (Joshel, 1997) "This celebration of the new vintage invokes the traditional sins of the Roman wife—unchastity and wine-drinking. Everyone and everything is out of control". P. 243

strong and powerful, unrelenting and without pity—none of which come readily to mind when describing Claudius. Nevertheless, the wrath of Claudius will be similar to a catastrophic storm in the end for the conspirators, thus the scene is reminiscent of the calm before the storm³³. Tacitus is using prophetic allusion here, and though Valens may simply see a storm it is more likely that he sees messengers from Ostia rushing to warn them of Claudius' approach. The figurative will soon become real.

The references to Bacchus and wine are certainly revealing here. Bacchus was the Roman god of wine and agriculture, equivalent to the Greek god Dionysus. Wine, of course, was associated with merriment, but also freedom from authority and even a certain drunken madness. These qualities seem particularly apt to a group of revelers celebrating with seemingly nothing to worry about. Tacitus is suggesting that they have fallen under a collective madness, unaware of the coming retribution, and that they are so ignorant of reality as to be laughably inept. The revelers have so little respect for the emperor that they do not believe that he represents any real danger. This party, however, is Tacitus' carefully conceived image of why the lovers never represented a serious threat to Claudius, getting as far as they did simply by his own ineptness and inaction. This is a key point in Tacitus' narrative when it is compared with the probable events that actually happened outside of Tacitus' rhetoric. A party like this is difficult to imagine having happened as written. The lovers' lack of concern is less a damning indictment of them and more on Claudius' rule. Here Bacchus and the wine may be affecting them more than they realize: for while Claudius the man may not represent much of a threat, the office of

³³ The Bacchic party could be seen as a preview of Tigellinus' wild dinner party (*Ann.* 15.37), which is immediately followed by the Great Fire of Rome (*Ann.* 15.38). Both inappropriate parties quickly lead to retribution.

the *princeps* certainly does, and it needs vengeance to keep its legitimacy as an institution.

But he is also deconstructing the growing theatricality that will overcome the principate: when the use of role-playing and performance comes at the expense of real life, obscuring the way leaders and the governed are supposed to act, and the proper performance of government. The external audience knows that an emperor is on the way later in the narrative, an emperor who would come to perform onstage. The Greeks long associated Dionysus with the theatre, putting on plays in his honor³⁴. This is where Tacitus explicitly parallels what is happening here with Greek comic theatre. John R. Clarke notes that “*the dominant theme of comic theatre [is] the reversal of expected and proper social roles. No one acts the way they’re supposed to*”³⁵. Tacitus is using the same construct here to provide humor to the scene, with no one acting as they are supposed to, whether it is the conspirators, or the emperor himself. Tacitus uses dramatic terms in the scene to reinforce the theatricality of the scene³⁶. This theatrical element would recall the common motif of the wife cheating on her stupid husband; Claudius seems to be playing this role rather well. There is a reason that infidelity is a common technique in comedy throughout the generations: the audience can share in the delight of knowing a secret that the husband does not know, they can openly laugh at the ignorance and humiliation of the man upon finding out, and they delight in seeing a character of (often) high stature be brought down by his own stupidity. The fact that the husband is always the last to know

³⁴ (Case, 1985) p. 321

³⁵ (Clarke, 2007) p. 36

³⁶ (Von Stackelberg, 2009) p. 610. Von Stackelberg says that his use of “*simulacrum, cothurnos, and chorus* to describe the vintage festival emphasizes the theatrical element, further eliding the distinction between *historia* and *fabula*”.

only makes it more humorous as happens here. Tacitus has given us the pompous cuckold, the lustful wife, and the young challenger who would be easily recognizable to a Roman reader familiar with New Comedy.

The theatrical element also recalls another common stock character in Greek theatre: the clever slave. This is used repeatedly by Plautus, one of the earliest Roman playwrights, who is adapting it from Greek New Comedy. In his play *Pseudolus* the two smartest characters are slaves who save the day for their masters and cheat money out of other aristocrats³⁷. At the end of the play master and slave have essentially switched roles, with Simo, the master, beholden to Pseudolus, his slave. This is also what is going on in this episode, for although the freedmen working for the emperor are not slaves they were at one time and are certainly lower in class than he is. This becomes clearer and a running theme as this episode progresses. The reader would surely recognize the significance of this as the freedmen's names are all Greek in origin.

Von Stackelberg believes that Tacitus sets up the theatrical nature of the section from the beginning in his disclaimer to the reader in *Ann.* 11.27. Here Tacitus is setting up *historia* and *fabula*, saying that “as with other forms of Latin rhetoric, subjective plausibility trumps objective veracity. Tacitus’ discourse of *fabula* therefore seems to introduce the performative nature of this episode”³⁸. While Claudius’ performance amounts to doing nothing, Messalina is performing in an active role, especially in the party scene. Tacitus has Messalina holding a thyrsus and playing the role of a follower of Dionysus; her presentation in this way “emphasizes her transgression of social norms, already evident in her aspiration to masculine authority. She is a chaotic figure, blurring

³⁷ *Pseudolus* is Latinized Greek literally meaning “lying slave”.

³⁸ (Von Stackelberg, 2009) p. 605

social distinctions in her choice of lovers, eliding the identity of Emperors with her polyandry”³⁹. The image of her in this way would certainly cause laughter from an external audience that knows very much where this is going and who will follow Claudius as emperor.

1.2 Revenge of the Cuckold

Tacitus shows us that the revelers’ lack of worry is unwise. To their surprise Claudius has finally been manipulated by the freedmen into action and is looking for vengeance. In their panic at this news that the messenger brings both Messalina and Silius abandon everyone, reverting to their original roles, one as a senator, the other an emperor’s wife. Messalina heads to the gardens of Lucullus, while Silius heads to the Forum to disguise his fear (*Ann.* 11.32). It is as if they have awakened from a dream and believe that things can go back to normal if they do not bring attention to what has happened, as if there is only truth in the performance—if the performance no longer occurs there is no truth. This again reinforces how easily manipulated Claudius is seen to be. Wearing costumes, animal skins (*feminae pellibus accinctae adsultabant*), is a visual marker of the reversal of fortune that is about to happen; once Claudius acts contrary to the lovers’ expectations in Tacitus’ narrative the costumes are gone, replaced by the normality of their usual surroundings before this episode, the gardens of Lucullus and the Forum. There is humor in how everyone scatters at the news and the sight of the centurions. For any other emperor this response would be expected but the panic seems to stem from the fact that it never crossed the revelers’ mind that Claudius would punish them. They were in their own theatrical world that they had constructed for themselves.

³⁹ (Von Stackelberg, 2009) p. 614-615

This sudden reversal of fortune brings out the tragic element while also emphasizing the comic; where Claudius was only moments before asking if he is still emperor (*Ann.* 11.31) it is now the conspirators asking similar questions. The allusions to theatrical tragedy would not have been unrecognizable to a Roman readership. Edward Champlin says that “Rome by Nero’s day was a city thoroughly accustomed to the widespread, programmatic representation of myth in public life, and to the deep implication of the audience in theatrical performance”⁴⁰. Though the events are obviously before Nero’s time, Tacitus is writing after Nero made the theatrical commonplace⁴¹. The fusion of tragic and comic theatre in this entire episode, especially the Bacchic celebration, shows the influence that the coming Neronian age had on Tacitus’ narrative style. The external audience would also be reminded of the coming days of Nero when these sort of celebrations would become more commonplace; particularly the sacrilegious marriage (“sorte d’anti-mariage sacrilège”) between Nero and Pythagoras (*Ann.* 15.37)⁴². The external audience would see both comedic and tragic elements of theatre and how art imitates, or foreshadows, life in the narrative future, but reader’s past.

Messalina knows that there is still a way out for her, though. She knows that as a woman Claudius cares about she can still manipulate and control him as long as she has the chance to plead her case. In order to look as pitiful and sympathetic as possible she gets on a cart used to remove garden waste and heads out to meet Claudius on the Ostian road (*Ann.* 11.32). It is no coincidence that Messalina is transported in this way: the

⁴⁰ (Champlin, 2003) p. 103

⁴¹ The association of a leader and the mythic is strikingly shown in Virgil’s *Aeneid* between Aeneas, the mythical founder of the Roman people, and Augustus.

⁴² (Galtier, 2011) p. 266. “On pourrait même songer, à lire la description des noces de Neron et de Pythagoras, qu’en respectant scrupuleusement le rituel, l’empereur se livre à une sorte d’anti-mariage sacrilège”.

gardens of Lucullus represent the heights of her power—but they are also where she will die and thus also represents her doom; the cart of garden waste shows just how far she has fallen⁴³.

But there is still great unease amongst the emperor's court, however. Everyone is very much aware of how dangerous Messalina and her influence over Claudius is. They know they need to keep their hands on the puppet strings if they have any hope of keeping Claudius under their control. There is even fear that others could still join Silius' potential insurrection. Once again it is a freedman that shows initiative. Narcissus offers to take control of the Praetorians for this pivotal day and he sits beside the emperor in his carriage to make sure that no one can change his mind along the way (*Ann.* 11.33). If the goal during the trip back to Rome was to give the emperor some backbone, spirit, and decisiveness then it was a dismal failure. Tacitus dramatizes a trip that must have been agonizing for Narcissus, with Claudius vacillating the whole way between the treachery of his wife and the love that he still had for her and his infant children. Narcissus pushes for a decision but all he gets in return are ambiguities.

When Messalina encounters him on the road we are treated to her attempt at reconciliation; she attempts to steal the puppet strings from Narcissus' hand. Tacitus stages a dramatic scene between them with Messalina trying to get Claudius' sole attention. She uses the children, Octavia and Britannicus, as stage props, reminders of a happier time and why she should be heard. She is interrupted by the cries of her accuser, Narcissus about her marriage to Silius, "distracting the emperor's gaze with a document listing her immoralities" (*simul codicillos libidinum indices tradidit, quis visus Caesaris*

⁴³ (Von Stackelberg, 2009) p. 610-611

averteret: Ann. 11.34). Tacitus writes Claudius as one would a child; people are trying to get his attention with noise, then trying to distract him with something shiny to look at. It may sound like a child, but it also sounds suspiciously like a puppet. Messalina had wanted to get his attention visually as well: she had planned to make a dramatic reveal of their children but Narcissus had one-upped her and put a stop to that by ordering their removal. Though this is a key win for Narcissus, the freedman reluctantly agrees that Messalina, as the emperor's wife, should be given the chance to defend herself against the charges. This was a lie, of course, for Narcissus knew that the emperor could never be allowed to hear Messalina plead her case—Claudius would forgive her and her retribution against the freedmen would be swift and unforgiving. But he had to continue playing the role of the impartial and loyal confidant, so he could not publicly deny Messalina's request.

Throughout all of this Claudius watches events passively, a man with no control, at the mercy of his freedman. To enflame the emperor's passions Narcissus takes the emperor into Silius' house; Claudius does become enraged seeing the statue of Silius' father and the scene of the crime, but it is important to note that he is still not showing control by becoming passionate, he is in fact showing an absence of it: Narcissus is teasing out the appropriate emotions with a pull of the strings. Even when the emperor speaks to the cohorts after, it is still largely through Narcissus' voice; Tacitus writes that Narcissus "delivered a preliminary statement. Then Claudius addressed the assembled Guard—but only briefly, because, just though his indignation was, he could hardly express it for shame" (*Ann.* 11.35). It gives the impression that Claudius is only saying what Narcissus wants; Narcissus may not be explicitly writing the words to say, but he is

filtering the message Claudius is giving; this is an important aspect in the decline of the principate which will only grow more important as we will see. The freedman is teasing the emotions he wants out of the emperor with the implied mockery that the offenders committed against him. Nevertheless, Narcissus has played his part well and enflamed the passions not just of Claudius but also the cohorts, who demand blood. A number of the so-called conspirators are executed, including Silius, who, unlike Messalina, begs for a quick death (*Ann.* 11.35). It is an ignominious end to someone who seemingly plays a significant, though brief, role in the *Annales* but one who we barely meet. There is no grand speech at the end, no description of how he met death, which is revealing. The lack of space given to him by Tacitus is a clue: ultimately he is neither important nor particularly interesting; it is only his reflection on the emperor that is essential.

Of the conspirators executed the only one who gives Claudius pause, Tacitus writes, is the actor Mnester (*Ann.* 11.36). He should therefore give us pause as well. Mnester was an actor, a performer of pantomime, a dancer, a *histrion*, Tacitus calls him—surely the same *histrion* that the freedmen mention shaming the imperial bedroom in *Ann.* 11.28, though there certainly could have been others. It is the same word that Tacitus will come to associate with Nero later on and the theatrics to come (*Ann.* 13.19, 13.21, 13.25, 13.28, 14.15, 14.21, 15.67, 16.4). Mnester was a well-known actor in Rome going back to the reign of Caligula. He was also a former imperial slave in the service of Messalina by Claudius' own orders. In addition to sleeping with her, Mnester was said to be having an affair with Poppaea Sabina, a woman who incurred the jealous wrath of Messalina (*Ann.* 11.4). Evidently Mnester was of service to Messalina in more ways than one.

Unlike Silius, Tacitus does give Mnester a final speech before death, though indirectly. When he is brought before Claudius, Mnester begs him to “look at his whip-marks and remember the words with which the emperor placed him under Messalina’s orders. Others, he urged had sinned for money or ambition, he from compulsion – and if Silius had become emperor he, Mnester would have been the first to die” (*dilaniata veste clamitans, adspiceret verberum notas, reminisceretur vocis, qua se obnoxium iussis Messalinae dedisset: aliis largitione aut spei magnitudine, sibi ex necessitate culpam; nec cuiquam ante pereundum fuisse, si Silius rerum poteretur: Ann. 11.36*). Tacitus says that Claudius is sympathetic to Mnester’s pleas and was tempted to pardon him until the freedmen put a stop to this line of thought. Their argument was that it would be in bad taste to kill these noble men but spare an actor. This is an attempt by the freedmen to stop more laughter and mockery at Claudius’ expense, but it would surely be a source of laughter to the reading audience: this is yet another example of Claudius being controlled by his freedmen after almost being controlled by an actor. Even more ridiculous, however, is that Claudius was being controlled by not just an actor, but an actor who was sleeping with his wife.

It also gives a glimpse of the coming *princeps* and the growing importance of acting and theatricality. Mnester shows that he is adept at giving a performance, in this case for his life, and shows that the lowest of actors may be best suited to the changing conditions of empire. But one does not need to be an actor professionally to act, indeed his profession proves his downfall in this situation. It shows the precarious state the principate is in when an actor can take hold of the strings of the mightiest of emperor’s and elicit sympathy. The emperor is vulnerable if he is not a knowing part of this

theatrical world; even though Claudius has the strongest role of all it means nothing if he does not know his part to play.

The Mnester scene also harkens back to the role Greek drama is playing in this sequence. I have already mentioned the “clever slave” stock character and suggested Narcissus fits that role quite well, despite not being an actual slave. Mnester is also a former slave but acting the slave for Messalina and entwined in her fate. In the play of the same name, the slave Pseudolus is able to get his wishes by tricking his “betters” the aristocrats, besting them in speech and getting what he wants; Mnester would have done the same if not for his fellow freedmen who are able to ignore the performance. The number of clever slaves in Greek and Roman drama shows that audiences enjoyed seeing the underdog beat their superiors and the laughter in a theatre could be transported just as well to their home while reading. It seems likely that in this situation most readers would have been rooting for Mnester to be pardoned, as he is powerless in this scene with only his wits and tongue to get him out of this situation; plus pardoning him would make Claudius look all the more foolish. The audience would enjoy seeing the powerless get the better of an unsuitable emperor. Of course, he is not pardoned, but that becomes part of the joke and still shows the comic nature of the scene: nobody is acting their proper role as it is the freedmen who have to step in and save the proper social hierarchy.

When Mnester asks Claudius to “remember,” Tacitus is also asking the reader to do the same, asking them to recall the mutinous soldiers and Germanicus. Ellen O’Gorman states that Mnester “attempts to use his body to evoke memory in the emperor Claudius. Although Mnester’s plea to the emperor is not in terms of reproach, his invocation of memory and display of the marks of the lash can be read as an injunction *to*

the reader to recall the earlier displays of the soldiers. These earlier displays which are termed reproaches, are also designed to evoke memory”⁴⁴. Both the soldiers and the actor are showing proof of their hardships to gain sympathy and win an argument. I would slightly disagree with O’Gorman in that both episodes *are* a reproach: they are meant to mock the person in power at the conditions they have given them and shame them into a capitulation. They are both using the power of mockery to attempt control of their listener. These lashes would add another layer to the humor as the reader would know how Mnester received the lashes. Though Tacitus’ writing on the subject has been cruelly lost to us in history, Mnester gives us a pretty strong hint: by saying that he received the lashes as a slave to Messalina and that “if Silius had become emperor he, Mnester, would have been the first to die” (*Ann.* 11.36) it is certainly suggestive that Mnester received the flogging due to some sexual misadventure at the hands of Messalina. The amorous nature of his relationship with Messalina would have meant his death should Silius have become *princeps*. This would have only added to the laughter had Claudius ultimately spared him even after seeing the whip marks, marks that advertised his wife’s shame and betrayal.

The end of Messalina touches on a particular fascination with Tacitus and a major theme of the *Annales*: that of how people act at the time of their death. Particularly interesting to Tacitus is how people either accept their death or do not, and how their character is revealed in the moments before. The deaths can often be a judgment on their lives, where they can either be praised by the reader or scorned with laughter and mockery. Messalina’s vacillation and despair in the Gardens of Lucullus are a condemnation of her character but it is equally so against Claudius, for her death sentence

⁴⁴ (O’Gorman, 2000) p. 138

is yet another decision made by his freedman Narcissus, not him. Like Mnester before, Tacitus makes it clear that Claudius' anger was dissipating at dinner and he would likely spare his wife if the "poor woman" had a chance to plead her case before him the next day (*miserae: Ann.* 11.37). Messalina dies the female Claudius, weak, indecisive, fearful, but without Claudius recovering from the passivity he has displayed through the entire episode. Still at his banquet, Claudius has no reaction to the news that his wife is dead, not even asking how. This is Claudius' final humiliation: he shows himself to be the quintessential passive character, unable to rouse himself to action unless prodded, unable to show emotion, unable to even ask a simple question. He is a wooden marionette seeing the world through glassy eyes ready to be put back into the toy box until his freedmen need him again.

1.3 Conclusion

Or so Tacitus would have us believe. As stated before, the idea that Claudius was a passive emperor incapable of action is wrong. This is perpetuated largely by the Roman upper class because he was given power by the Praetorians and not acclaimed by the senate. The Messalina episode emphasizes the air of illegitimacy that would always follow Claudius around by showing him running back to the Praetorians to play kingmakers once again. He is an emperor without the authority to be emperor, and, Tacitus suggests, he seems to know it by repeating the question (*identidem interrogaret an ipse imperii potens an Silius privatus esset: Ann.* 11.31). The negative perception is also because of the emperor who follows him. For Tacitus' narrative to work he has to show how the conditions of state allowed an emperor as bad as Nero to gain power, and thus it was the ultimate failure of the predecessor, Claudius, to allow this event to have

happened. Laughter and mockery are the most effective tools to show this unsuitability and failure. Tacitus uses the theatricality of this episode, showing traits of comic theatre, the ignorant cuckold of high-status and the clever slaves as saviors, mixed with traits of tragic, the wild reversal of fortunes of the doomed lovers, to show the importance theatricality will play in the coming reign. By constructing the episode as a comedic disintegration of a marriage, and not focusing on the conspiracy of high-ranking Romans against Claudius' rule, as it probably was, Tacitus is using laughter and mockery to suit his narrative purpose. That does not make the facts wrong, indeed other sources largely corroborate the events, but by focusing on the embarrassing nature of the episode, the secret infidelity, and showing Claudius' passivity and indecisiveness, Tacitus is able to show effectively Claudius' unsuitability to the office of *princeps*.

Tacitus frames the tale so that Claudius will be humiliated in the fullest fashion. He does this by making Claudius the last to know, he then has him react in fear at the news, instead of anger and determination to fight for his honor and position, as would be expected; he has him continually ask if he is still emperor, showing that he has neither control nor resolve; he shows no decisiveness, but has to be told what to do and what to think; he does not even show emotion at the end when learning of his wife's death, seemingly accepting that events will always be outside his control, condemned to be a passive passenger to the whims of fate, despite having the most powerful job in the world.

Because of this laughter and mockery Claudius is shown to be a man ill-suited for supreme power in the principate. There is no explicit laughter during the episode, but there very much is coming from the external audience who know well where this story is

heading: towards the murder of a shamed emperor and the rise of one who is somehow more shameful⁴⁵. Each character in this episode is mocking Claudius, whether it is Messalina and Silius getting married in front of witnesses, the freedmen who control him like a puppet, or the reader laughing at his passivity. They are laughing because Claudius has lost two important things during the course of events: his wife to another man, and an empire to former slaves. He is an emperor doubly humiliated. Potentially triply, for he has lost control of himself to passivity. Tacitus is laughing too, as he enhances the comedy of the situation by staging it as a Greek comedy with nobody following their proper roles. The target of the laughter is a man who is not only unfit for leadership but outside the social norms of Roman society. There would also be a darker tone to their laughter as well, as the end of Messalina is the entrance of Agrippina onto the stage. The performative and theatrical nature of the tale is a harbinger for the performative and theatrical emperor to come. What is also shown however, is that Tacitus chose laughs to show this unsuitability, showing the power of his rhetorical viewpoint. This could have been written as the heroic tale of an emperor cornered but who used his strength and courage to overcome a treacherous plot and avert a disaster for the empire; this could have been the tale not of Claudius the Cuckold, but Claudius the Hero.

⁴⁵ Though there is certainly implied laughter by the lovers and their guests at the wedding and Bacchic celebration it is noteworthy that Tacitus makes no mention of it. He lets the events themselves be the implied laughter of the entire city at Claudius' expense.

II. The Laugh Track: *Alienae Facundiae* and Laughter

If the Messalina affair was supposed to be an important lesson for Claudius he would prove to be a slow learner. His next marriage, to Agrippina, his niece no less, would somehow prove more disastrous than the last. Given a chance to stand up to the new wife, and rectify the problems he had with Messalina, Claudius fails in a similar way; only this time the consequences are not humiliation and loss of legitimacy, they would be death. Proving even more ambitious than Messalina, certainly more ruthless, the sources claim Agrippina murdered Claudius by poison in 54CE⁴⁶. What follows is Nero and the next downward step in the principate and the end of the Julio-Claudian line. It would also be the next step in Tacitus' narrative where laughter and mockery would prove to be even more important, shown immediately when Nero gives the eulogy at Claudius' funeral. What should be a grand goodbye to an emperor is turned into a grand introduction to a new emperor, the most important character of the last third of the *Annales*, Nero. What makes this scene so important comes down to the simple act of an audience laughing; but at what and whom will have profound consequences for the future of the empire. This simple act of laughing, in effect, signifies a transference of power from speechwriter to performer.

The eulogy scene in the *Annales* represents the moment Nero realizes the power of performance, and how laughter and mockery can create that performance in his upcoming reign; he also learns that he can afford to go off script, perhaps even write the role himself. While Claudius needed a script provided by freedmen to make his decisions,

⁴⁶ Suetonius *Claudius* 44.2-3; Cassius Dio 60. 34. 2-3

Nero is an actor who goes beyond a script into improvisation, defining himself and his rule by theatrics and mythology. While Claudius did not know the role he needed to play, Nero is well aware of the role and the theatricality of it all. This means there is a continuous tension in the scene between the verbal and the performative action: this may be the first time that an emperor needs borrowed eloquence, yet, paradoxically, this is also where an emperor first breaks from the script.

Claudius died suddenly. Tacitus tells of *scelus* yet again on the part of his wife, this time Agrippina, poisoning a dish of his favourite mushrooms (*Ann.* 12.67)⁴⁷. Agrippina does not announce his death right away, for she is controlling events, making sure she arranges for the right moment to seek the support of the Praetorians and announce her son, Nero, as the new *princeps*⁴⁸. Their support would be needed again but this time a woman was the puppet master⁴⁹. Though Tacitus mentions some confusion among the cohorts as to why it is not Britannicus named, they dutifully follow the wishes of Agrippina and Nero is acclaimed (*Ann.* 12.69)⁵⁰. Thus, it is a boy of seventeen who is suddenly thrust into the command of the mighty Roman empire, and one who is tasked with giving a speech at Claudius' funeral. Because of the emperor's youth, his tutor Seneca, is himself given the task of writing the speech for the young emperor, an

⁴⁷ (Galtier, 2011) p. 107n. Galtier points out that *scelus* is a word Tacitus frequently uses for crime, particularly when describing poisoning: "Tacite utilise fréquemment le terme *scelus* pour désigner un « crime », en particulier lorsqu'il s'agit d'un empoisonnement". (*Ann.* 12.66, 12.67)

⁴⁸ (Aveline, 2004) That Agrippina poisoned Claudius is far from an established historical fact. Aveline suggests that Claudius needed Agrippina for legitimacy after the Messalina incident, and Agrippina needed Claudius to give Nero legitimacy on the field of battle (p. 464). He argues that it is much more likely that Claudius died accidentally from eating naturally poisonous mushrooms, and Agrippina's delay after Claudius' death is evidence that she was surprised (p. 472).

⁴⁹ This harkens back to Augustus' death which Livia, his wife, initially kept secret. Tacitus mentions a rumour of her involvement in his death. (*Ann.* 1.5)

⁵⁰ The confusion would stem from the fact that Nero was adopted by Claudius, while Britannicus was Claudius' biological son with Messalina.

unprecedented event, we are told by Tacitus, for all previous emperors composed their own speeches.

As the audience arrived and sat down to hear the eulogy of the former emperor, they would be expecting to hear the familiar platitudes about the fallen that one hears at a funeral. The audience wants to show their new emperor the respect and deference they believe he is looking for; after the trouble some of them had under the previous emperor, none of the audience members would want to single themselves out to Nero by giving an improper reaction. But even though he is *princeps*, strangely it is Nero himself who has most on the line: Nero is very young, and as a new youthful emperor he needs to alleviate fears that he is *too* young, or just like his predecessor. He wants the support of the senate to give him legitimacy going forward.

2.1 *Nemo Risui Temperare*

Nero begins the eulogy by bringing up the antiquity of Claudius' family (*Ann.* 13.3)⁵¹. This immediately connects Nero to Augustus and sets up comparisons between not just Claudius but Nero himself and their ancient family, especially the preceding emperors Augustus, Tiberius, and Caligula. But most clearly it sets up *comparatio* between Claudius and Nero. Tacitus uses words here to signal a connection to the past, such as *antiquitatem*, *maiolem*, *seniores*, and *vetera*. Tacitus suggests that the speech is initially going well and to script, for “While he recounted the consulships and triumphs of the dead man's ancestors, he and his audience were serious. References to Claudius' literary accomplishments too, and to the absence of disasters in the field during his reign, were favorably received” (*dum antiquitatem generis, consulatus ac triumphos maiorum*

⁵¹ As Claudius married his niece, it is also Agrippina's family, and therefore Nero's as well.

enumerabat, intentus ipse et ceteri; liberalium quoque artium commemoratio et nihil regente eo triste rei publicae ab externis accidisse pronis animis audita: Ann. 13.3). But things start to fall apart: when Nero began to talk of his stepfather's foresight and wisdom nobody restrained their laughter (*postquam ad providentiam sapientiamque flexit, nemo risui temperare: Ann. 13.3).* The way Tacitus has framed this, first saying both "he and his audience were serious" and then "nobody restrained their laughter" suggests that it is not just the audience laughing here, but Nero himself.

This would be a troubling beginning for those around Nero, like Seneca, Burrus and Agrippina. There is a lot at stake in this performance: it is the chance to make a first impression as a leader, the first chance for people to see whether you are suited for the role. The audience would be eager to like him; they were saying a long-awaited goodbye to the old and welcoming in the new⁵². Nero's youth compared to Claudius' aged sickliness provided a striking contrast; he symbolized a new beginning and a chance for the senatorial order to reassert the importance they had seemingly lost in the Claudian regime. For Nero it was even more important: it was a chance to gain approval from the senate and thereby the legitimacy which Claudius had always seemingly lacked⁵³. Both Claudius and now Nero had been acclaimed emperor by the Praetorians, but good relations with the senate would start Nero's reign off to the positive start that Claudius missed out on.

⁵² (Osgood, 2011) p. 245. Nero would not have been a complete unknown to many in the audience. "Like earlier 'princes,' and unlike Claudius, by his accession, Nero had already developed significant relationships with all the key elements of Roman society".

⁵³ (Champlin, 2003) p. 139. Making his connection to Augustus is key. "To Nero in 54, the imitation of Augustus brought with it a degree of legitimation: his connection with his predecessor, Claudius, had been questionable (great-nephew, stepson, son by adoption), but unlike Claudius he could claim that the blood of the first princeps ran in his veins".

The senators are not the only ones laughing here, however; there is also the implied laughter of the reading audience. It is important to note that the internal audience and external audience are very different and are potentially laughing at different things. On a surface level, at least, the internal audience is laughing at the perceived lack of wisdom in Claudius, the comparison of the former emperor with Augustus, and the comparison of Claudius to the wisdom associated with a typical philosopher. In all cases Claudius is coming up lacking. The external audience may be laughing at these as well, but they are also laughing at the unprecedented nature of the laughter itself. They are in a privileged position of knowing the eventual outcome of Nero's reign and thus can laugh at the new emperor and his perceived superiority to Claudius. The external audience can be conflicted, however; they can be both amused at the reaction of the internal audience and also be sad and even angry at what the laughter portends, the eventual descent of the empire into civil war.

The reading audience laughs at both the ignorance of the internal audience but also the sycophantic nature of their laughter. Are they laughing just to please Nero and implicitly praise him as already the superior to Claudius? Are they laughing because they do not have any idea what else to do in the situation and laugh to hide their discomfort? Perhaps—there is probably a combination of these factors which we will look closer at later. The reading audience has no such worry—they are not performing for a new emperor and can laugh in the privacy of their home⁵⁴.

⁵⁴ However, Tacitus' *Annales* may have been intended to be read aloud at public readings, potentially making the external audience somewhat more similar to the internal audience than might first appear. The lack of an emperor watching and judging their reaction would be the presumed major difference.

We will focus first on the internal audience. The inner audience is made up primarily of the senate, but we also have Seneca, the writer, and Nero himself. As we will see, all have different goals and aspirations in relation to this scene. It is somewhat interesting that the laughter occurs at “wisdom” and not “literary accomplishments”. Everyone seems to accept that Claudius was an accomplished writer and historian⁵⁵. It seems like for these accomplishments a certain amount of wisdom would be necessary. This suggests that the laughter may be less at Claudius’ lack of wisdom and more at the way he applied this wisdom towards his role of *princeps*. It is also noteworthy that no laughter comes from the mention of “absence of disasters in the field”. This is potentially a favorable comparison of Claudius to Augustus, bringing to mind the massacre in the Teutoberg forest, or the mutinies of the soldiers under Tiberius. Claudius, to his credit, did oversee an expansion of empire in Britannia; however, the senators in the audience may have been grinding their teeth here, for Claudius is more known for granting citizenship to foreigners and letting them into the ranks of the senate⁵⁶. Many of these senators may have resented him for some perceived loss of prestige and privilege. Thus, some of the laughter could be at the lack of wisdom he displayed in taking care of the ancient authority of the senate, making them a hostile audience from the start⁵⁷.

We can see the frustration the senate had with Claudius in the three chapters directly before the Messalina affair with Silius—as if its placement by Tacitus suggests a

⁵⁵ The audience’s laughter here might very well remind readers of an incident described by Suetonius. It was said that during a public reading of a history that he wrote Claudius kept erupting into laughter because a large member of the audience had broken through his chair (Suet. *Claud.* 41).

⁵⁶ (Osgood, 2011) p. 256

⁵⁷ (Romm, 2014) p. 66. More sinisterly for the senators, Claudius “had murdered large numbers of them (or in a more generous mood, had forced them to commit suicide). He had used the vague charge of *maiestas*, treason, to arrest his enemies, then tried them in secret proceedings within closed chambers of the palace”.

motive for conspiracy against Claudius (*Ann.* 11.23-25). The senate argued before the emperor that it was unwise to allow new members of foreigners into the senate, while Claudius argued for the Gallic inclusion: “let them bring in their gold and wealth rather than keep it to themselves. Senators, however ancient any institution seems, once upon a time it was new!” (*Ann.* 11.24). But it was probably the memory of Messalina that the senate found the most amusing. The incongruity of praising a cuckolded man’s wisdom who allowed a potential insurrection to form while he worked on insignificant things like adding new letters to the Latin alphabet would have raised more than a few chuckles of mockery from the embittered senate.

The internal audience could be laughing at Nero for having the audacity to say these words, but Tacitus is clear that they are aware that the words are written by Seneca. This in itself would be funny: they are laughing that an emperor is reading the words of another man and that a philosopher like Seneca would make an emperor read words that he knows to be false. The internal and external audience could then be laughing at the confusion of it all. The internal audience are unsure what they are supposed to do; they want to ingratiate themselves to the new emperor but are unsure what kind of reaction he wants. Are they supposed to agree with his words and thus risk missing a joke and glorifying Claudius at the expense of Nero? If they display the wrong reaction they risk a new emperor’s anger and a bad first impression. In uncertain circumstances laughter often seems the best course; this is precisely because of the ambiguity of laughter itself. Laughter can be mocking and an attack on the performer, but mild laughter could be seen as approval and tacit agreement with the speaker. If the performer is laughing the safest course for the audience is to laugh as well.

What we have then in this scene are two sides that want something. The speaker, Nero, and the writer, Seneca, want a good first impression to acquire the legitimacy of the senate; while the audience, the senators, want to believe in the hope of positive change that a new *princeps* can bring. But there is an imbalance of power here, which gives the laughter a sycophantic quality. There is the impression that the audience is essentially an ancient laugh track, laughing because the absurdity of Nero's comments seem to mean that it is expected. An underlying aspect of the absurdity of Nero's words is that at least some in the audience, potentially most, would have suspected that Agrippina, or even Nero himself, was behind Claudius' death. Tacitus says that "Contemporary writers stated that the poison was sprinkled on a particularly succulent mushroom" (*ut temporum illorum scriptores prodiderint infusum delectabili boleto venenum: Ann. 12.67*). We cannot be sure that Agrippina did kill Claudius, but we can be sure that there were at least rumors at the time of treachery involved. This would add another layer to Nero's words: the absurd praise was coming from the benefactors and potential murderers themselves. This makes laughter seem the expected response from an audience that is wanting to please and fearful of the consequences of not doing so. Their laughter would then be seen as a way to ingratiate themselves towards the new *princeps*. Nero's response, seemingly to laugh himself, could at first be the initial awkwardness of a speech gone wrong—creating laughter when none was meant. But once Nero clued into the sycophantic nature of the laughter, that it is in fact coming from a receptive audience, he would realize that this opened up new ways to express himself. Once an emperor realizes that he has a ready-available laugh track the creative possibilities toward improvisation are endless.

The internal audience can find the words funny, but they cannot know what Nero truly believes in the eulogy because he is reading another man's words. The external audience would find this humorous because they know the ambiguity will only grow—they know the path to theatricality that Nero will go down; speaking the words of others will be commonplace for Nero on the stage. The speech by Seneca “was highly polished – a good example of his pleasant talent, which admirably suited contemporary taste” (*oratio a Seneca composita multum cultus praeferret, ut fuit illi viro ingenium amoenum et temporibus eius auribus accommodatum: Ann. 13.3*). This suggests rhetoric that Nero would not have been capable of composing himself; so, while the speech itself may have been good at a surface level, it would have lent a falseness to the proceedings. The second part of the sentence is most striking, that Seneca's talent “admirably suited contemporary taste” (*Ann. 13.3*). This is an interesting choice of words, again suggesting that his style would have been immediately recognizable to the audience. But it would also be an implicit criticism of Seneca by Tacitus, charging that Seneca was well-suited to working in a principate where truth is at the mercy of appearance and rhetorical tricks⁵⁸.

Thus, the writer of these words must be carefully considered. As we saw, Tacitus wrote that Nero was interested in artistic pursuits, but it was Seneca that refined them. It was Seneca who was recalled by Claudius from exile to tutor Nero, and it was by Seneca that Nero was taught the qualities an ideal emperor should have, such as rhetorical skill. Nero would have been introduced to the power of the written word and the great

⁵⁸ (Romm, 2014) p. 67. Romm translates the line slightly differently, but his important point remains: “The ears of that time,’ after all, were accustomed to hearing doublespeak and empty flattery. Tacitus was himself both a writer and a courtier, who had survived the reign of the despotic Domitian only by carefully adapting his words. He had sympathy for Seneca's plight—but a certain contempt as well”.

literature of the time—many of the works written by Seneca himself. Because of the emperor's youth and inexperience, it was Seneca's job to allay fears, make Nero look competent, give the impression he was the opposite of Claudius—in short legitimize Nero's position. Tacitus writes that it was a good speech and that the accomplishments of Claudius were well received, suggesting that this was supposed to be a dignified ceremony and that people were following the script initially, as it was seen as an important step to get Nero's reign off to a good start. Nero had to walk a fine line between honoring his father and distancing himself from him as well—be the dutiful son, but show you are nothing like him. However, Tacitus makes a telling remark of this laughter: *nemo risui temperare*. He is saying that *nobody* refrained from laughter, which, as we have seen, seems likely then that Nero did not refrain from it either⁵⁹. Presumably, this may also mean close members of Claudius' family like Octavia, Britannicus, and even Agrippina⁶⁰. This would be quite the moment for the young emperor; one can imagine an awkward, nervous, potentially embarrassed young man worried about the implications of the laughter. There would be a danger in doing nothing, just as acting angry or embarrassed would only compound the problem; it would show that there is an unwanted crack in the performance, that the script is broken—there is even a danger that it would appear that the laughter is directed at you. There is an easy solution to the potential disaster that laughter represents: join in. By laughing himself Nero would be

⁵⁹ (Ker, 2012) p. 317. "Indeed, the implication that of 'no one could control their laughter' (*nemo risui temperare*) is that even Nero lost his composure as he delivered it—surely a failure of the teacher who was charged with his rhetorical education".

⁶⁰ A striking scene to be sure, but perhaps one that goes toward the delicate nature of the transition of power and the importance of their careers being tied to Nero's success—especially Octavia, as wife to Nero. The two children of Claudius may have felt they had to go along with Nero for appearances' sake. Agrippina is another matter; her laughter would certainly add menace considering the likely rumours of her involvement in the emperor's death.

protected from the danger of being laughed at and he would be taking the initiative by laughing at a target. This is an example of Nero being improvisational, in what should be a highly scripted scenario, and playing to the reaction of the audience. Claudius is certainly one of the targets they are laughing at—he is the subject after all. But there would be another obvious target that is being bombarded with this laughter: the writer of the script himself, Seneca. He is the writer of the words that nobody can get through without laughing.

Of course, there are issues with this to consider. By *nemo* Tacitus could also mean Seneca joined in as he could very well be in the crowd. But that is not certain and it seems very doubtful that the writer of the script would join in on laughter that Tacitus makes clear was a surprise and not intended. Another issue is chronology, for we cannot know for sure who laughed first. It could potentially change the tale if it was Nero or even Seneca who laughed first, with the senators reluctantly joining in. But this seems like a detail that Tacitus would have included if it were the ones in charge of the performance who broke first. Tacitus deliberately leaves out who starts laughing presumably because he does not think it important who started or who responded to the laughter: by stating *nemo* Tacitus is putting the onus on the collective, those on stage and those as the audience, who give voice to the laughter.

This would naturally portend trouble for Seneca and have grave political consequences. When Nero breaks character and laughs during a serious speech to his forebear, it shows that he is either unwilling or unable to treat the script he is given seriously. It is trouble if a writer has no actor who will work for him. Nero is making a mockery of Seneca's work and his reputation. Seneca is offering the new emperor an

experienced voice. This seems like it should be the perfect solution for an inexperienced emperor, but it can only work if the emperor is willing to follow the script offered.

Bursting into laughter in his first major public event as emperor is not a promising start.

Before the laughter, Tacitus writes that the *seniores* were noting that Nero "needed borrowed eloquence" (*alienae facundiae eguisse: Ann. 13.3*). These older men are comparing a new emperor to the previous and trying to establish a trajectory. By using another's eloquence Nero has set himself up unfavorably with the other emperors. Tacitus writes that "Julius Caesar had rivalled the greatest orators. Augustus spoke with imperial fluency and spontaneity" (*nam dictator Caesar summis oratoribus aemulus; et Augusto prompta ac profluens quae<que> deceret principem eloquentia fuit: Ann. 13.3*). This presupposes that oratorical skill was necessary for Caesar to become dictator; he needed the skill to gain support and consolidate his power⁶¹. Augustus recognized the importance of this and, though a step down from Caesar, still did well at it. Tacitus writes that "Tiberius was a master at weighing out his words—he could express his thoughts forcibly, or he could be deliberately obscure" (*Tiberius artem quoque callebat, qua verba expenderet, tum validus sensibus aut consulto ambiguus: Ann. 13.3*). This shows that it is not always important for a *princeps* to be clear and understood; it can be just as powerful to create fear and discomfort with confusion. The ability to be obscure could be a powerful tool to create "plausible deniability" but also to keep people on their toes. There is an element of obscurity in Nero's eulogy; though probably unintentional at first, he learns here the benefits of making your audience second guess what you mean and be

⁶¹ (Osgood, 2007) p. 339. "An august voice, by the logic of physiognomy, was the sign of an august leader".

unsure how to act. This would gain greater importance when Nero fully embraced the theatrical nature of the principate.

The final two comparisons may be the most important however. Tacitus says that “Even Gaius’ mental disorders had not weakened his vigorous speech; Claudius’ oratory, too, was graceful enough, provided it was prepared” (*etiam C. Caesaris turbata mens vim dicendi non corrupit; nec in Claudio, quotiens meditata dissereret, elegantiam requireres: Ann. 13.3*). These are damning indictments if Nero cannot measure up to the oratorical skill of emperors with diseased bodies and minds. From the beginning “Nero’s mind, though lively, directed itself to other things” (*Nero puerilibus statim annis vividum animum in alia detorsit: Ann. 13.3*). A vigorous mind suggests that Nero has the intelligence and capabilities of being successful at rhetoric, but his interests lay elsewhere in artistic pursuits. These were unbecoming interests in an emperor, suited more for a Greek artist than a man in control of armies.

It is interesting that right after the eulogy Tacitus has Nero go back on script however when he gives a speech in the senate:

Sorrow duly counterfeited, Nero attended the senate and acknowledged its support and the army’s backing. Then he spoke of his advisers, and of the examples of good rulers before his eyes. ‘Besides, I bring with me no feud, no resentment or vindictiveness,’ he asserted. ‘No civil war, no family quarrels, clouded my early years.’ Then, outlining his future policy, he renounced everything that had occasioned recent unpopularity. ‘I will not judge every kind of case myself’ he said, ‘and give too free rein to the influence of a few individuals by hearing prosecutors and defendants behind my closed doors. From

my house, bribery and favouritism will be excluded. I will keep personal and State affairs separate. The senate is to preserve its ancient functions.

Ceterum peractis tristitiae imitamentis curiam ingressus et de auctoritate patrum et consensu militum praefatus, consilia sibi et exempla capessendi egregie imperii memoravit, neque iuventam armis civilibus aut domesticis discordiis imbutam; nulla odia, nullas iniurias nec cupidinem ultionis adferre. tum formam futuri principatus praescripsit, ea maxime declinans, quorum recens flagrabat Invidia. non enim se negotiorum omnium iudicem fore, ut clausis unam intra domum accusatoribus et reis paucorum potentia grassaretur; nihil in penetibus suis venale aut ambitioni pervium; discretam domum et rem publicam. teneret antiqua munia senatus... (Ann. 13.4).

Seneca is trying to allay fears that Nero is a king, that he will continue Claudius' progression toward greater autocratic rule, and calm worries about his youth by saying that there are advantages in having a leader so young—that he is too young to have prejudices and ancient hatreds (*neque iuventam armis civilibus aut domesticis discordiis imbutam*). Seneca is in fact saying that Nero's youth means he is a blank slate, who will need the help and wisdom of others to rule; he is therefore placating the army and the senate by giving them more power. It is somewhat reminiscent of the child emperors of the late Imperial period who were ceremonial leaders, giving legitimacy to the reign, but often being controlled by their generals. Seneca is suggesting that it will be the senators themselves who will take back control and be the generals. Seneca is taking a seemingly negative trait, youth, and making it into a positive, a new beginning, and Nero is able to

act the role here. What is most clear, is that Nero and Seneca are trying to do the opposite of what the senate believed Claudius was doing⁶². The soldiers and senate are seemingly mollified that Nero will not curtail their power by increasingly autocratic, or kingly, rule. Nero is trying to portray himself as the anti-Claudius, and the senate would have had some optimism that that could be the case with a new leader so different in appearance and age as the last one.

However, it is interesting also how Tacitus begins this chapter; right after the eulogy and before the senate address he writes “Sorrow duly counterfeited” (*Ceterum peractis tristitiae imitamentis*). This is an acknowledgment that Nero’s thoughts on Claudius were never genuine, proven with the laughter in the eulogy. Nero was caught saying the absurd, but it is only when he himself joins in the laughter that the performance was fully exposed as false. This would put everything he says in the senate also in doubt; those that saw the performance exposed at the eulogy must be aware that everything that follows is part of that same performance. They would be aware that what was said were not really the words of the emperor, but of Seneca, and that the emperor himself not only did not believe them, he found them so ridiculous that he was not able to say them with a straight face⁶³. Seneca and Nero’s intentions may be the same: they both want a strong beginning to Nero’s reign, with the backing of the senate; but their pathway to that goal is not necessarily aligned. Seneca wants a standard script to be followed, while Nero wants the freedom to stray from that script into improvisation. Seneca

⁶² (Osgood, 2011) p. 252. “Now Nero needed to start distancing himself from his predecessor: unlike Claudius, he had not come to power in a way that seemed illicit, and so there were no wrongs or hatreds to avenge; his principate would see a repudiation of those practices which had of late caused so much resentment”.

⁶³ (Ker, 2012) p. 319. “Tacitus shows how Seneca’s speechwriting role for Nero further clouded the relationships between self and other, rhetoric and policy, elite and emperor, outsider and insider”.

believes power can be held by giving people how they think an emperor should act, Nero is beginning to think that what people really want is a performance.

So, in the end, does the laughter here help or hinder the objectives of the inner audience: the senate, Seneca, or Nero? For Seneca it is a resounding failure, as he wrote a ridiculous script that Nero cannot follow without laughing, proving that the partnership is on the wrong page. The laughter in the eulogy seems an initial win for the senate as they have a new emperor who laughs and responds positively to them, but it is ultimately a failure, because their laughter suggested to Nero that they would allow him great leeway in how he wished to present himself. Nero found the most success of all: he found a potentially new way of ruling which suited his particularly artistic abilities, and a ready and willing audience ready to play along.

2.2 The Clown and the Parasites

For the Tacitean reader many of the roles would be clearer because they have an idea where this is all heading. The theatrical roles at play would be apparent for the reader as they help make up a large part of what the *Annales* is ultimately about. For instance, the audience in the eulogy with their easy laughter could be acting the role of the parasite (or "sponger," according to Beard), a stock-character type: "the ancient cliché was that spongers flattered their patrons by laughing at their jokes, whether they were funny or, more likely, not... [their laughter] is not a spontaneous reaction to a hilarious one-liner but a well-practiced response to his patron's verbal posturing masquerading as a spontaneous reaction"⁶⁴. But if this is the case, then Nero here is approaching perilously close to the role of the *scurra*, a wit and joke-teller, sometimes even a clownish type of

⁶⁴ (Beard, 2014) p. 12

figure. A *scurra* is a particularly Roman character, seemingly untranslatable into Greek, but close to the Greek stock character of the parasite⁶⁵. In this situation, however, the *scurra* and the parasite are playing very different roles and feeding off of each other, with Nero the *scurra* and the audience the parasite. *Scurrae* are men who can be popular and draw power from causing laughter but they have the air of disreputability about them; for a “man who raises a laugh risks becoming...ridiculous”⁶⁶. There is always a dangerously close connection between laughing *with* and laughing *at*. What makes *scurrae* so alarming for Romans is that they are performers willing to say or do anything for the approval of the audience; this makes them uncomfortably close to being an actor on a stage playing for an audience⁶⁷.

Drawing on Cicero and Quintilian, two writers Tacitus’ readers would be quite familiar with, Mary Beard shows how Romans evoked laughter and the dangers of it⁶⁸. She suggests that “laughter is provoked not by ugliness itself but—at a second order level—by the wit of the joker who exploits the ugliness to make a joke”⁶⁹. She says that “By and large, verbal wit on its own is not the most effective way of raising a laugh. Double entendres...are liable to attract praise for their cleverness but not loud laughter”⁷⁰. Instead, Beard explains, it is saying the unexpected and what the audience

⁶⁵ (Beard, 2014) p. 153

⁶⁶ (Beard, 2014) p. 125

⁶⁷ (Beard, 2014) p. 119. This gets to a particularly Roman anxiety “that surrounded all oratorical performance at Rome centered on the tendentious boundary between the elite orator and the dishonourable actor”.

⁶⁸ (Beard, 2014) p. 99-127. Beard offers a detailed comparison of Cicero’s *De Oratore* and Quintilian’s handbook on oratory in her chapter “The Orator”. Both ancients warn of the dangers of laughter rebounding onto the speaker.

⁶⁹ (Beard, 2014) p. 116

⁷⁰ (Beard, 2014) p. 117

does not expect to hear that will draw the biggest laugh⁷¹. A reliable way of drawing a laugh is through physical exaggeration or mimicry, as a clown or mime does⁷². But there are obvious dangers here “that such tactics of laughter—especially if they involved ‘excessive imitation’—brought the orator uncomfortably close to the mime actor (*mimus*) or the professional mimic (*ethologus*)”⁷³. There could be even more dangers involved: “the first is the potential for laughter to rebound on the joker, and the second is that prompts to laughter are very often untrue”⁷⁴.

It is not necessarily that it is because Nero is saying nice things about Claudius that the crowd laughs—this was a funeral for a deified ruler, they would have expected nice things said. But it is how they are said and the context. The emperor died in mysterious circumstances and now his successor—the one who benefits from his death—is now praising him to the point of absurdity. It is the excessiveness that shows the truth of Beard’s point above, that the unexpected is effective in drawing out a laugh: the unexpected of what the emperor’s scriptwriter is forcing him to say. It is the novelty of a new emperor as well, one who most in the crowd had probably never heard give a major speech before. Anything the emperor does or says will be a surprise. Potentially there was a falseness to Nero’s delivery—perhaps a monotonous or robotic tone, or even the opposite, an exaggerated and over-the-top performance—that the audience picks up on, knowing, or at least strongly suspecting, that Nero does not believe a word of it. Because Nero is reading the words of another man he would be seen less as an orator at a funeral

⁷¹ (Beard, 2014) p. 117. As Beard notes: “This is the closest we ever come in the ancient world...to a developed version of the modern incongruity theory”.

⁷² (Beard, 2014) p. 118

⁷³ (Beard, 2014) p. 119

⁷⁴ (Beard, 2014) p. 124-125

and more of an actor performing a script, or a mime mimicking what the role of an emperor *should* be. They would be laughing at the absurd position Seneca, as the writer and director, has put his actor in. This role is further blurred when Nero hears the unexpected laughter but decides to play along. He could have acted angrily at the laughter, said nothing, or simply panicked. He instead improvises and joins in the mockery, performing for the crowd much in the same way a clown would. When he improvises for the crowd the readership would see the *scurra* that he would become.

When Nero talks of Claudius' wisdom the senators can remember well the Messalina affair and can laugh at the absurdity of the comment. By saying something patently false—in the senators' eyes at least—that brings Nero's credibility and trustworthiness into question. Suddenly he seems not only a *scurra* but someone potentially even worse: an actor or mime, willing to say or do anything for a laugh. This will become much clearer later in his reign when he performs in theatres for an audience, becoming both mime and actor. This also harkens back to the mime we met in the previous episode: Mnester and the whip-marks he suffered for a performance from a demanding audience of one, Messalina (*Ann.* 11. 36). Here the laughter is the whip. Nero is in danger of having the humor rebound on him and brand him by bringing something up that he is potentially susceptible to: by laughing at the perceived lack of wisdom of his predecessor it highlights the youth and inexperience of himself. How much wisdom could there be in a seventeen-year-old now in charge of an empire?

The counter argument of course is that neither Nero nor Seneca were going for a laugh in the first place. They were trying to follow a script of what a proper new emperor should do for a fallen one to ensure a smooth transfer of power. Yet this does little to

deflect the falsity of what Nero says: he is now shown to be someone who will say, do, or even joke about anything in order to keep power, no matter the cost to his appearance or integrity. He has put himself in this position by saying the absurd.

For the Tacitean reader, the audience has become the parasite in Greek comedy, dependent on their patron—here the emperor—and are willing to laugh at anything to ingratiate themselves to him. The audience as parasite may be an imprecise label for them as the parasite is someone who takes something of value without giving anything of real value back⁷⁵; Nero wants something of value from the audience: approval and support for the legitimacy that his reign needs at the beginning. But there could be degrees of parasitism, and forms of it that they are displaying: excessive flattery. What the parasite represents is sycophancy to the extreme. Tacitus had already made clear what he thought of the problem in the principate of sycophancy in the senate, growing worse from the reign of Tiberius. It is instructive to look at Tacitus' words at length in *Annales* 3.65:

The only proposals in the senate that I have seen fit to mention are particularly praiseworthy or particularly scandalous ones. It seems to me a historian's foremost duty to ensure that merit is recorded, and to confront evil deeds and words with the fear of posterity's denunciations. But this was a tainted, meanly obsequious age. The greatest figures had to protect their positions by subserviency; and, in addition to them, all ex-consuls, most ex-praetors, even many junior senators competed with each other's offensively sycophantic

⁷⁵ (Damon, 1995) p. 185. Damon cautions against a simplistic definition of the Roman parasite: "it would be a very limited economy in which goods had to be exchanged for others of precisely the same order. Then again, one may ask how the arbiter determines the rate of exchange. More fundamental still is the question of why we humans fail to shut out the parasite, why we tolerate him in the first place if he prevents us from living like the gods".

proposals. There is a tradition that whenever Tiberius left the senate-house he exclaimed in Greek, ‘Men fit to be slaves!’ Even he, freedom’s enemy, became impatient of such abject servility.

Exequi sententias haud institui nisi insignis per honestum aut notabili dedecore quod praecipuum munus annalium reor ne virtutes sileantur utque pravis dictis factisque ex posteritate et infamia metus sit. ceterum tempora illa adeo infecta et adulatione sordida fuere ut non modo primores civitatis quibus claritudo sua obsequiis protegenda erat sed omnes consulares magna pars eorum qui praetura functi multique etiam pedarii senatores certatim exsurgerent foedaque et nimia censerent. memoriae proditur Tiberium quoties curia egrederetur Graecis verbis in hunc modum eloqui solitum ‘o homines ad servitatem paratos!’ scilicet etiam illum qui libertatem publicam nollet tam proiectae servientium patientiae taedebat.

Thomas Strunk suggests that these are among the most important words in the *Annales*, for they go to the heart of Tacitus’ goal in his historiography⁷⁶. He wants to highlight positive *exempla* and shame the weak and cowardly. Sycophancy is one of the greatest problems that dynastic rule perpetuates for Tacitus; continuing autocratic rule ensures that *adulatio* will always be seen as the quickest and easiest path to career advancement in the senate. It ensured that Romans “no longer competed in demonstrating their virtue as under the romanticized Republic (Sall. *Cat.* 9.1), but in demonstrating their servility”⁷⁷. When Tiberius became *princeps* and dynastic rule became the new system of

⁷⁶ (Strunk, 2017) p. 137

⁷⁷ (Strunk, 2017) p. 138. (citing Vielberg 1987, 100-101)

rule, *adulatio* also became the new standard. Tacitus even starts his work with humorous examples of this excessive *adulatio* in the senate, first with the senatorial debate of Augustus' funeral. Valerius Messalla suggests that an oath to Tiberius should be repeated every year, prompting Tiberius to ask if this is really his own belief, to which Messalla "answered that it was his own idea—and that in matters of public importance he intended to use his own judgment and no one else's even at the risk of causing offence. This show of independence was the only sort of flattery left" (*Ann.* 1.8). The second is when Quintus Haterius, after offending Tiberius with his own excessive flattery, throws himself at the emperor's feet in supplication, knocking Tiberius down⁷⁸ (*Ann.* 1.13). Here *adulatio* is not just pathetic; it almost gets the senator killed. Both episodes are amusing when compared to the supposed "Republican virtue" of the past. They are also neatly connected to the upcoming Germanicus episode with the mutinous legions discussed earlier (*Ann.* 1.35)⁷⁹. All these episodes show falsity of action with their actual belief and absurdity when compared to the perceived past. Tacitus' readers would see the crowd in the eulogy as symbolically throwing themselves at the feet of the new emperor with laughter that they think will please him.

Tacitus' readership would also recognize the laughter as the start of the divergence between Seneca and Nero. They would know what the internal audience may have only suspected at the time: that the partnership between a philosopher and a performer could not possibly work over the long term. They would find this especially

⁷⁸ Strunk gives the examples of Messalla and Haterius, to show that Tacitus wants a return to Republicanism. I believe, however, that two things can be true: Tacitus can criticize excessive *adulatio* in the principate without getting rid of the institution itself nor calling for a return to Republicanism. This is a failure of individuals and *princeps* for Tacitus.

⁷⁹ As the Germanicus episode shows ridiculous adherence to "Republican ideals" is just as absurd as sycophancy in the principate.

amusing because of their knowledge of what Seneca would write soon after; it is through this later work, the *Apocolocyntosis*⁸⁰, that we see the power, and potential damage, of the audience's laughter. It is also through this work that the falseness of Seneca's words in the eulogy are shown; it is shown that he is yet another one of the sycophants that Tacitus has previously mocked.

Not long after the eulogy Seneca wrote what is loosely translated as the "Pumpkinification", a satirical work chronicling the death of Claudius and his efforts, as a ghost, to be deified and placed among the immortal gods⁸¹. After his death Claudius travels to heaven to argue his inclusion among the great order, which includes the first emperor, Augustus⁸². He fails to convince them and is cast to the underworld where he is condemned to play dice in a box with no bottom and to be a freedman's secretary⁸³. This is a work that savagely mocks Claudius and his perceived faults: his looks, his trouble speaking, his cruelty, his uncertainty, his authoritarianism, and the power and control freedman and foreigners seem to have over him—the very same faults that caused the laughter in the eulogy in the first place⁸⁴. But where Seneca was trying to avoid laughter with the eulogy, he overtly tries to achieve it here by showing Claudius as a comic buffoon, most clearly by having him die while evacuating his bowels ("*vae me, puto, concacavi me.*" *Quod an fecerit, nescio: omnia certe concacavit: Apoc 4*). He even

⁸⁰ (Osgood, 2011) p. 15. Probably written in the same year as Claudius' death.

⁸¹ Also known by the Greek title *Apokolokyntosis*. It is Cassius Dio who first makes mention of the work by Seneca, calling it the "*ἀποκολοκύντωσις*" (Dio 61.35).

⁸² (Champlin, 2003) p. 116. Nero makes a brief appearance in the work (*Apoc 4*) but it is believed to have been inserted at a later date by either Seneca or someone else. Tacitus' readers would surely still connect Nero with the text, however.

⁸³ (Paschalis, 2009) p. 206

⁸⁴ (Osgood, 2011) p. 254. "All of the faults imputed to Claudius in Nero's speech to the Senate are brought out here, and more."

references the Messalina episode by having Claudius meet Narcissus, the freedman who controlled him during that conspiracy, and then two of the victims from it: Gaius Silius and Mnester, a man Claudius had made “a foot shorter” (*Mnester pantomimus, quem Claudius decoris causa minorem fecerat: Apoc 13*). Coming so soon after the eulogy this gives the impression that this is potentially a reaction and a corrective to that laughter. The work has the appearance of Seneca trying to save face and win points from Nero by amusing him⁸⁵. Seneca saw that Nero enjoyed satirical mockery of others during the eulogy, so he gave him a whole work devoted to it⁸⁶. The Claudian faults in Nero’s speech, notably the cruelty and authoritarianism, are displayed here only now in a narrative of mockery.

The Tacitean reader would surmise that this work could have been Seneca’s effort to avoid mockery himself. They would see the *Apocolocyntosis* as a work designed to appease the new emperor⁸⁷. It is thus through the satire that we can see the true falsity of Seneca’s written speech in the senate. The work proves that Seneca himself never really believed in his written words. The philosopher is proven a liar, and Nero is proven correct for laughing at them. The words of Seneca are shown to be hollow to the Tacitean reader; the *Apocolocyntosis* is then an extension of this. The readers can laugh at the hypocritical philosopher lowering himself to mockery in order to save his position in

⁸⁵ (Sullivan, 1968) p. 456. Being a member of Nero’s literary court would have led to serious competition to impress, for “such a circle bred rivalry, friendly or otherwise; and of course reputation and power built on literary fame incite both jealousy and attack”.

⁸⁶ (Osgood, 2011) p. 255. “But, even more, he was also specifically attacking Claudius, for he was eager to undercut his own performance in the essay *To Polybius*, which must have seemed mortifying now.” Seneca wrote this essay in exile to Claudius’ freedman, exhorting the emperor’s mercy in order to be pardoned.

⁸⁷ (Griffin M. T., 2000) p. 45. “The *Apocolocyntosis*, a satirical look of Claudius’ deification, was clearly intended to please the young ruler, who enjoyed the satire of personal attack and had himself made Claudius’ elevation the object of an imperial witticism”.

court. Thus, when Tacitus says that Seneca’s writing talent “admirably suited contemporary taste” (13.3) his readers would recognize that Tacitus is saying that Seneca is in fact part of the problem—that his rhetorical doublespeak is both a symptom and a cause of the problems infecting the principate.

Tacitus recognized that much of the laughter from the audience comes from the deification of such an absurd emperor; thus he talks about the deification in the chapter immediately preceding the eulogy (*Ann.* 13.2). The absurdity of the deification is where the humor of the *Apocolocyntosis* comes from, memorably dramatized by describing Claudius’ limping ascent to heaven with unequal steps (*non passibus aequis: Apoc* 1)⁸⁸. More importantly, however, the *Apocolocyntosis* provides the funeral scene in the *Annales* with much more humor for the external audience. In Seneca’s work, Claudius ineptly misinterprets the pleased attendants of his funeral as being devastated by his death and celebrating his life. It is only when he sees his funeral that Claudius finally realizes that he is dead. The funeral is so beautiful to him, with the horns and trumpets blaring, that he thinks it must be a funeral for a god, for everyone was happy and cheerful and walking as if free (*et erat omnium formosissimum et impensa cura, plane ut scires deum efferrī: tubicinum, cornicinum, omnis generis aenatorum tanta turba, tantus conventus, ut etiam Claudius audire posset. Omnes laeti, hilares: populus Romanus ambulabat tamquam liber: Apoc* 12). He is in effect watching the same happy and cheerful people who are laughing at his eulogy in Tacitus. In fact, Tacitus is showing what Claudius saw in the other work and he is inviting people to imagine that Claudius himself could be

⁸⁸ (Osgood, 2011) p. 254. “Even as the Senate officially declared Claudius a god, Seneca through his ‘apocolocyntosis,’ reclassifies Claudius as a beast, hard to understand, of difficult gait, frightening in appearance, and, ultimately, bloodthirsty.”

there watching the proceedings in his ghostly form, hearing the laughter of the senators, misinterpreting it the whole time. For Tacitus' readers, the specter of Claudius becomes a member of the laughing audience at his own funeral, enjoying it so much that he does not want to leave (*Delectabatur laudibus suis Claudius et cupiebat diutius spectare: Apoc* 13).

The eulogy's laughter would have signaled to Seneca a grave misstep. It would have signaled that he was caught writing absurd words to fool an audience; he was caught writing words suitable for another time, and certainly for another emperor. This would once again remind the readers of Germanicus and the mutinous legions (*Ann.* 1.35). Tacitus and the soldiers mock Germanicus for saying the ridiculous and threatening the absurd: he threatens to kill himself under the guise of "Republican virtue" when the times have changed so significantly. They mock the belief that killing yourself for honor or country is the same when under the command of an authoritarian ruler. Seneca did not realize that his words at the eulogy were written for another age as well and sounded absurd to an audience who were naturally predisposed to dislike Claudius. Seneca knew it was a tricky balancing act, between honoring the adoptive father of a *princeps* and distancing from him, a balancing act that ultimately failed. While Germanicus never could stab himself, neither could Nero get through Seneca's ill-suited words without laughter. But both Germanicus and Seneca could learn from their mistakes, and the *Apocolocyntosis* seems to be a product of that education⁸⁹.

⁸⁹ (Fulkerson, 2006) p. 178. Germanicus learns from his earlier failed theatricality and stages a more convincing performance for the soldiers by having the wives and children sent away from the camp for their own safety (*Ann.* 1.40-41): "The *topos* 'women at the sack of a city' is a standard feature of historical writing; here it has a significant twist of being designed not to arouse the emotions of the reader, as is usual in history, but those of the observers within the scene. It is therefore narrative but also performative, historical and also dramatic".

2.3 Conclusion

Nero would rule for many years after this eulogy, but his downfall began when he heard the laughter. He realized that he did not need to follow Seneca's script; he learned that it was more fun giving the audience a performance; he learned that he could achieve favorable reactions by laughing and mocking others; he learned that mockery is a useful way to diminish a target and enlarge your standing by comparison. He learned that he wanted to make his reign about performance and theatre rather than as a reader of speeches. There is a performance involved in getting people to laugh; you must speak well, use gestures to create excitement and sustain interest, there's timing involved, often rehearsal to perfect the craft, and one generally needs a sense of humor. These are all characteristics of actors. If at this time Nero most wanted to be a performer on stage, he now learned that he could still be one, only as emperor. He would use these characteristics of actors to make his reign more theatrical as the years would go by.

By showing Nero stay on script with his speech to the senate, right after going off script in the eulogy, Tacitus is showing us that he as the writer has also learned something of the theatrical as well. Showing a Nero who is on script shows an emperor who has promise. There is a sense of what could have been if he had followed the carefully written script provided for him. This starts his reign off with elements of a Greek tragedy. There is a glimpse of good, a sense that maybe the disaster to come does not have to be so. But there is also a sense that the main character's very nature will be his downfall. Things all changed with the sound of the laughter; that sound doomed him and pointed his rule into another direction. The laughter from both him and his audience in the eulogy has tainted everything with a falseness now; everybody now knows that he

is reading from a script that he does not even believe in. What use are his promises now, how can anything he say be trusted? In this sense the eulogy to the previous emperor could be considered a eulogy to himself: his reign is doomed before it has really even begun.

The laugh track shows Nero a path toward gaining popularity while doing what interests him: performance. Nero responding to the laugh track is an emperor giving permission to be laughed at as all part of the performance⁹⁰. These performances could, and eventually will, be musical, dance, sport, or acting on stage. The laugh track gives Nero the confidence that he will be given a positive reaction to the audience that he most wants to please: the Roman people through entertainment. He can use performance to connect with these people and represent himself as mythical characters which gives him legitimacy to rule. Throughout the rest of his reign, he will chase the laugh track and its positive reinforcement for him.

The laugh track also furthers Tacitus' rhetorical goal as well. The laughter signals an emperor turning towards clownish behavior to find his legitimacy with the people. The reader can see the increasing role that sycophantism plays in allowing this behavior and perpetuating it; the conditions being such that a philosopher has to rewrite the script he had offered and turn toward mockery. The laughter represents doom for the reader: the doom of the philosopher who has proven to not be on the same page as Nero, and doom for the principate itself as it hurtles towards disintegration. The laughter then, ultimately, has a strong sense of the macabre.

⁹⁰ (Beard, 2014) p. 7-8. This is notably unlike in Dio (73 (72).21) where the writer is a member of the audience at the arena watching Commodus slay an ostrich as if a gladiator. The emperor looks ridiculous and unsuitable to his role, but, in an interesting contrast, he is certainly not giving the audience permission to laugh at him.

Therefore, the eulogy is a remarkable scene in the *Annales*: it is the first time that borrowed eloquence is used and yet at the same time it represents a breaking from that eloquence. Speaker, author, and the dead are all to some degree a target of the laughter. There is also another target: the internal audience themselves, for if they are laughing at Nero, Nero is also laughing *at* them. As the writer of the script, however, the laughter mocks Seneca most of all and puts an emphasis on the relationship he and Nero have and its fragility. Needing a ghostwriter will forever taint Nero: how much of him is performance, how much genuine? This scene will also forever connect Nero to the writers around him as he continually seeks to find his own voice. The connection with writers will bring into focus another writer: Tacitus himself and the rhetorical nature of his work. Tacitus uses the laughter and mockery in the eulogy scene to signal that the principate has entered a new level of theatricality. This downward trajectory of theatricality, which will eventually see the principate crumble into a period of civil war, reaches its lowest point when Nero makes a critical decision involving his mother.

III. Mother Must Go: The Ridiculous Death of an Empress

The third and last episode that we will look at in our examination will be the death of an empress, Agrippina. In many ways this scenario feels like the culmination of Tacitus' usage of laughter and mockery in his narrative, as it is unmatched in its over-the-top ridiculousness—potentially only equaled by the emperor's own death. Soon after Nero's eulogy to Claudius and his speech in the senate there is a telling scene that hints at this episode to come. After Nero's introduction to both the senate and the reader as emperor, his mother, Agrippina, attempts to join her son while he is performing the duties that his office demands, meeting ambassadors from Armenia (*Ann.* 13.5). It is a small moment, but one with great implications: it shows that there will be a battle between Seneca and Agrippina to be the defining voice of the new emperor and that, though Agrippina will last another five years, her hold over her son is slipping. It also hints that in the struggle to find his own voice, Nero will eventually have to get rid of both. When he does finally decide to do away with his mother, he tries to do it in the most theatrical way possible. Though he will eventually succeed in having her killed, he will fail spectacularly in the theatricality of the event, which was really the entire point of the exercise. In trying to stage a natural death, Nero only succeeds in highlighting the falseness of it. This failure is where laughter and mockery arise in this lengthy scene; Tacitus uses the failed theatricality of the event as an ominous precursor to the eventual failure of Nero and then the principate itself⁹¹.

⁹¹ (Woodman, 1993) p. 104. In some ways the failed theatricality of this event is a harbinger of the failed performances in the upcoming Pisonian conspiracy, the longest singular episode in the *Annales* (*Ann.* 15.48-74).

It would not take long for the cracks to start forming between Nero and his mother. Tacitus states that it started as soon as he became emperor when he gave that first speech to the senate. Nero promises the senators more power, an end to corruption and the obligation of designate quaestors having to hold gladiatorial games, all of which Agrippina opposed “as a reversal of Claudius’ legislation” (*quod quidem adversante Agrippina, tamquam acta Claudii subverterentur: Ann. 13.5*). Tacitus says that the new rules were adopted, though the meeting was convened on the Palatine in a room with a door at the back so that Agrippina could listen in behind a curtain (*obtinuere patres, qui in Palatium ob id vocabantur, ut adstaret additis a tergo foribus velo discreta, quod visum arceret, auditus non adimeret: Ann. 13.5*)⁹². Agrippina is now “the man behind the curtain” in the *Wizard of Oz*, and Nero can only hope no one pays attention to her.

It is here that Tacitus relates the Armenian episode. While an Armenian delegation was pleading before Nero, Agrippina makes an appearance, moving as if to sit with the emperor on his dais (*Ann. 13.5*). Everyone witnessing her entrance was mortified into stunned silence, until “Seneca instructed Nero to advance and meet his mother” (*nisi ceteris pavore defixis Seneca admonuisset, venienti matri occurrere: Ann. 13.5*). Thus, Nero’s “show of filial dutifulness averted the scandal” (*ita specie pietatis obviam itum dedecori*). The episode shows the clear divide forming between Seneca and Agrippina for the control of the young emperor. But there is a farcical nature to the scene, with Agrippina’s surprise arrival bringing the meeting to a halt and raising the dramatic tension—only Seneca’s quick thinking prevents Nero from being humiliated in front of his guests. Tacitus says that the delegation was pleading before Nero (*apud Neronem*

⁹² (Barrett, 2017) p. 68. Not a one-time event: “his use of the imperfect *vocabantur* suggests repeated practice”.

orantibus), which gives no question that Nero was in the position of power with the supplicants humble before him. The humor here is that Agrippina puts the roles here suddenly in doubt: power could potentially switch the other way around to the Armenians if Agrippina was successful in sitting beside her son. Nero would be exposed as an emperor in name only—he would be exposed as a boy who has to share power with his mother. This would open him up to the danger of laughter and mockery, whether from Armenia or much closer to home.

The episode highlights Nero's acting ability, for when the emperor meets his mother Agrippina seems to believe that the move shows "filial dutifulness" while the reader and everyone in the room know that it is a show of dutifulness, intended only to prevent his own embarrassment. The episode is also a clear example that Agrippina wanted to be, and even assumed that she was, co-regent with Nero⁹³. She believed that her son owed his position to her alone and that she considered her power to be at least the equal to his own. Though he was the public face to this power she would not be satisfied hiding behind a curtain forever.

There were indications that Agrippina had ambitions for herself just as much as for her son, even under Claudius. It was likely at her suggestion that Claudius gave her the title of *Augusta*⁹⁴. Then, in an unprecedented move, the name of the town of her birth was changed from Oppidum Ubiorum to Colonia Agrippina⁹⁵. In coins and statues she

⁹³ (Barrett, 2017) p. 65. "Building on foundations laid under Claudius, she pushed the boundaries of what was deemed politically acceptable for a woman to unprecedented and, in the end, politically unacceptable limits. Astonishingly, she seems to have sought nothing less than a de facto and even perhaps a quasi-constitutional co-supremacy".

⁹⁴ (Drinkwater, 2019) p. 36. "Agrippina was the first wife of a living emperor to be so distinguished. Though strictly speaking still a name, *Augusta* was well on the way to becoming a title."

⁹⁵ (Drinkwater, 2019) p. 36-37

was depicted with Claudius, advertising her importance to his legitimacy⁹⁶. Thus, she would not have been happy playing a role in the shadows. Things would deteriorate further when Nero fell in love with Acte, a former slave (*Ceterum infracta paulatim potentia matris delapso Nerone in amorem libertae, cui vocabulum Acte fuit: Ann. 13.12*)⁹⁷. Agrippina became enraged at the prospect of having an ex-slave as her equal (*Sed Agrippina libertam aemulam, nurum ancillam aliaque eundem in modum muliebriter fremere: Ann. 13.13*), causing Nero to turn more toward Seneca and less toward his mother. Seeing her diminishing power and influence she wonders aloud to Nero if putting him on the throne over Britannicus was such a good idea. In a fury she “let the emperor hear her say that Britannicus was grown up and was the true and worthy heir of his father’s supreme position—now held, she added, by an adopted intruder, who used it to maltreat his mother” (*neque principis auribus abstinere, quo minus testaretur adultum iam esse Britannicum, veram dignamque stirpem suscipiendo patris imperio, quod insitus et adoptivus per iniurias matris exerceret: Ann. 13.14*). She threatens him that this could always be remedied, with Britannicus assuming his role as emperor.

This would, of course, be the end of Britannicus. The words only compounded Nero’s hatred toward his stepbrother, for during the Saturnalian festivities Nero had tried to humiliate Britannicus by ordering him to sing in front of the entire gathering. Thinking they would mock his singing, Britannicus instead “composedly sang a poem implying his displacement from his father’s home and throne. This aroused sympathy—and in the

⁹⁶ (Drinkwater, 2019) p. 42. “Agrippina continued to carve out a place for herself in the Roman state.”

⁹⁷ (Barrett, 2017) p. 75. Acte would prove to be one of the few regular and successful relationships Nero had with a woman. “Interestingly, social mores obligated him on this occasion to be the dominant partner in this affair, which may account in large part for its success. Casual sexual relations between master and freedwoman were not uncommon in ancient Rome, but the love affair that began very early in Nero’s reign between Nero and Acte, a former imperial slave from Asia, proved a major force in his life”.

frank atmosphere of a nocturnal party, it was unconcealed. Nero noticed the feeling against himself, and hated Britannicus all the more” (*ille constanter exorsus est carmen, quo evolutum eum sede patria rebusque summis significabatur. unde orta miseratio, manifestior quia dissimulationem nox et lascivia exemerat. Nero intellecta invidia odium intendit: Ann. 13.15*). Nero decides on poison and has Britannicus murdered while eating dinner with his companions, and moreover under Agrippina’s watchful gaze⁹⁸. Tacitus writes of her shock here: “Agrippina realized that her last support was gone. And here was Nero murdering a relation” (*quippe sibi supremum auxilium eruptum et parricidii exemplum intellegebat: Ann. 13.16*). The child of Valeria Messalina was dead and Agrippina’s mother-son relationship based on trust with Nero was effectively over⁹⁹. It would be an uneasy next four years¹⁰⁰.

3.1 What Do We Do About Mother?

When the time came for Nero to get rid of his mother, Tacitus makes clear that this was not a spur-of-the-moment decision, but a long time coming. Tacitus says that “Nero ceased delaying his long-meditated crime. The longer his reign lasted, the bolder he became. Besides he loved Poppaea more every day” (*diu meditatatum scelus non ultra Nero distulit, vetustate imperii coalita audacia et flagrantior in dies amore Poppaeae:*

⁹⁸ (Devillers, 2007) p. 275. Tacitus connected spectacles and the crimes of Nero. “Tacite lie, par des phrases de transition ou des juxtapositions, activités spectaculaires et crimes de Néron”. Devillers gives the example of Britannicus singing followed by his murder soon after (*Ann. 13.15*), as well as Nero’s arena debut soon after his mother’s murder. “Au début du livre XIV, les débuts de Néron dans l’arène et sur la scène apparaissent comme une conséquence du meurtre d’Agrippine II: c’est à ce moment que Néron s’abandonna à des plaisirs mal maîtrisés jusqu’alors, mais dont une sorte de respect envers sa mère avait retardé l’assouvissement” (*Ann. 14.13*). p. 275

⁹⁹ (Devillers, 1995) p. 328. “La mise en évidence de similitudes entre les deux situations confère une certaine unité au livre XIV et fait correspondre celui-ci avec un nouveau stade dans l’évolution du principat de Néron : l’empereur n’hésite plus à faire couler le sang des siens”.

¹⁰⁰ (Barrett, 2017) p. 71. “From late 55 to 59 CE, she essentially disappeared from the literary record and her influence over events at the heart of government ended. Her remarkable constitutional experiment had failed”.

Ann. 14.1). But interestingly Tacitus also says that this was not a crime done solely on his own impetus, but, rather, it was initiated by a woman. Tacitus says that Nero’s lover Poppaea, frustrated by Agrippina’s interference in preventing their marriage, “nagged and mocked him incessantly. He was under his guardian’s thumb, she said—master neither of empire nor himself” (*aliquando per facetias incusare principem et pupillum vocare, qui iussis alienis obnoxius non modo imperii, sed libertatis etiam indigeret: Ann.* 14.1). The key words here, *per facetias incusare* and *pupillum vocare*, signal that Poppaea is using words to mock Nero’s agency as emperor and as a man. This harkens back to the same charges against Claudius—charges Nero very much knew as he propagated them with the hopes of looking better by comparison. The mockery would cut deep into the psyche of an emperor who has been struggling to find his voice, as a man who needs “borrowed eloquence” and his mother’s ruthlessness to obtain power. This is a key scene in showing the potential power that mockery has in controlling a person: the puppeteer can get the puppet to stir to action by bringing to attention the perceived shortcomings that the puppet has about themselves. The emperor has a cold bucket of water thrown on his self-image as leader with Poppaea playing the dreaded “everybody’s talking” card—that everybody knows that Nero is not the real leader. It shows the fragility of power—that it can be lost if the appearance of legitimacy is punctured. Mockery has the ability of transcending appearance, or perhaps better said, of pointing out the appearance—that appearance is performance, not necessarily truth. Mockery has a way of reminding one of the elusive and fleeting nature of power¹⁰¹.

¹⁰¹ (Devillers, 1995) p. 344. By insisting that Poppaea is the instigator of the murder “il souligne le parallèle entre celle-ci et Séjan, ainsi qu’entre les meurtres d’Agrippine et d’Octavie. D’autre part, il illustre le déclin de l’influence de Sénèque, qui n’est pas associé dès le départ à l’importante décision prise par l’empereur de se débarrasser de sa mère”.

Poppaea even goes further than this. Tacitus gives her a speech where she complains that Nero will not marry her while his mother is alive:

“Otherwise”, she said, “why these postponements of our marriage? I suppose my looks and victorious ancestors are not good enough. Or do you distrust my capacity to bear children? Or the sincerity of my love?”

“No! I think you are afraid that, if we were married, I might tell you frankly, how the senate is downtrodden and the public enraged by your mother’s arrogance and greed. If Agrippina can only tolerate daughters-in-law who hate her son, let me be Otho’s wife again! I will go anywhere in the world where I only need hear of the emperor’s humiliations rather than see them—and see you in danger, like myself!”

cur enim differri nuptias suas? formam scilicet displicere et triumphales avos, an fecunditatem et verum animum? timeri ne uxor saltem iniurias patrum, iram populi adversus superbiam avaritiamque matris aperiat. quod si nurum Agrippina non nisi filio infestam ferre posset, redde<re>tur ipsa Othonis coniugio: ituram quoquo terrarum, ubi audiret potius contumelias imperatoris quam viseret periculis eius immixta. (Ann. 14.1)

This last line (*ituram quoquo terrarum, ubi audiret potius contumelias imperatoris quam viseret periculis eius immixta*) is particularly biting. She sets herself up as a woman who cannot help but tell the truth, no matter the consequences; this is her “sin” and the reason he does not marry her, since he cannot handle the truth. She then tells him this “truth”, even though she insinuates that it is against her best interests. She makes herself a martyr by saying that she would rather be away from the man she loves

so that she did not have to see him humiliated. This is, in fact, a humiliation in itself for Nero. By making herself the martyr she is disguising the mockery. Whether true or not she is insinuating that people everywhere are mocking Nero behind his back. She is playing the role of Narcissus here, trying first to stir their emperor to an emotional response, then an active one. Agrippina is then playing the role of Messalina, dangerously threatening the legitimacy of the emperor (*iram populi adversus superbiam avaritiamque matris aperiat*). With the last line in particular, she is trying to give the impression of a Messalina-style wedding behind his back; something that the nation can see while he cannot, all the while losing power with every snicker and laugh in the shadows.

Poppaea is suggesting that hearing of the humiliation is somehow less painful than seeing it, placing the power of the visual as greater than auditory. This ties into the visual nature of theatricality and performance. But the key to it is that she looks selfless and devoted to him by saying that she would rather sacrifice herself by being away from him. It is all an act of course. Tacitus makes this clear himself: “This appeal was reinforced by tears and all a lover’s tricks” (*haec atque talia lacrimis et arte adulterae penetrantia: Ann. 14.1*). This is another not-so-veiled Tacitean dig at the wiles of women and their untrustworthy nature as they try to lead you away from the right path. But it is also pointing out the importance of performance and theatricality in Nero’s reign. The fact that Nero falls for it further shows the unsuitability of the emperor: no one falls easier for an actor’s performance than an actor himself.

There is another Messalina-element to the following scene that Tacitus makes hard to ignore. He says that most of his historical sources agree that in her attempts to control her son Agrippina offered herself “all decked out and ready for incest” (*Ann.*

14.2). Agrippina here is acting as the lustful Messalina did, willing to do anything, including defiling her body for the sake of manly ambition and power. Seneca, as he did in the Armenian ambassador story, rescues Nero from his mother by interceding. Now it is Seneca playing the role of Narcissus; while the freedman used Claudius' mistresses to inform him of the grave situation, Seneca himself uses a freedwoman to inform Nero of the dangers an affair with his mother would cause and the risk it would pose to the loyalty of the army. There is certainly a scandalous element to these rumors, but this is also a warning to Nero that he is becoming a target of mockery behind his back, which harkens back to what Poppaea was saying before. There is the suggestion that mockery has the potential to so stain an emperor that he loses the legitimacy which has put him in power in the first place. A mocked emperor is in serious danger of being an illegitimate one.

Once again Tacitus feels the need to interject himself into the story to bolster his own credibility, crediting his research skills when he mentions Cluvius Rufus and Fabius Rusticus as two divergent sources on who initiated the incest, Agrippina or Nero. Tacitus says that Cluvius' account blaming Agrippina as the aggressor is more credible because most other authors say the same. He acknowledges that the blame Agrippina gets for the incest might be tinged by her varied sexual history (which, to Tacitus, makes him very fair and balanced), again reminding the reader of Messalina, for a sexual woman is a woman not to be trusted.

Once the decision was made to kill her, Nero was left with a dilemma: how does one properly kill one's mother? The ridiculousness of the moment comes from deciding on an unspeakable act and then going through the banality of the details. Should it be an

understated affair, or one filled with pomp and circumstance? Tacitus gives the impression that Nero knew the decision on the method of death was almost as important as the death itself. He does this by having Nero debate between poison or sword (*veneno an ferro vel qua alia vi: Ann. 14.3*). He dismisses poison because of how recently it had been used against Britannicus. This is an interesting detail, for it shows that even the most powerful man in the world needs to worry about controlling the narrative. No matter how unpopular Agrippina might be to the populace, they would still look with revulsion at a man who murdered his own mother. But it is also a humorous detail (for those with a darker humor, of course); this is a detail that Tacitus is unlikely to know for sure, but he includes it for the cold glimpse we see of a man debating the method of her death as if he was shopping for eggs at the market, or taste testing meals he was planning for a dinner party. There is humor to the fact that Nero is a man who must switch up the manner of killing one's family members to avoid suspicion but also potentially to make the killing more interesting; repeating oneself is creatively uninteresting and dramatically anticlimactic. Poison is also deemed to be unsuitable because Agrippina "had strengthened her physical resistance by a preventative course of antidotes" (*Ann. 14.3*). This only adds to the absurdity and thus the humor of the scene: first, that the participants acknowledge that she is smarter than Nero and seemingly always a step ahead of him; secondly, that she feels the need to do this at all based on the threat a son poses to his mother, and thirdly, that this was believed to be a wise preventative action. Taken together in context they show the comically ridiculous lengths people will go to stay in power.

This debate highlights the fear Nero had regarding his mother and potentially the real reason behind her murder¹⁰². Tacitus could be downplaying real threats of treachery against the emperor—downplaying them in a similar way to what he did with Claudius and Messalina: making Claudius out to be a dimwitted cuckold rather than a defender of the state. Here Nero could be seen in a similar vein: a mere prop for the women in his life, with Poppaea the current force, but Agrippina being the all-encompassing one. By showing two emperors struggling to find their agency against their women controllers, it gives the events to come even greater absurdity.

Finally, Anicetus, yet another freedman, has the solution to all of Nero's worries: a collapsible boat that could sink to the bottom of the bay, taking Agrippina with it.

Tacitus writes:

However, a scheme was put forward by Anicetus, an ex-slave who commanded the fleet at Misenum. In Nero's boyhood Anicetus had been his tutor; he and Agrippina hated each other. A ship could be made, he now said, with a section which would come loose at sea and hurl Agrippina into the water without warning. Nothing is so productive of surprises as the sea, remarked Anicetus; if a shipwreck did away with her, who could be so unreasonable as to blame a human agency instead of wind and water? Besides, when she was dead the emperor could allot her a temple and altars and the other public tokens of filial duty.

¹⁰² (Southon, 2018) p. 248. Tacitus "says that Nero decided not to kill her the clean and traditional way (by sending an assassin to run her through with a sword) because he feared that the assassin would not carry out the orders...Tacitus had hid Agrippina from us for four years, but there are enough clues to strongly suspect that she was still a force in the Roman state who held a terrifying amount of power over the army and the guards".

obtulit ingenium Anicetus libertus, classi apud Misenum praefectus et pueritiae Neronis educator ac mutuis odiis Agrippinae invisus. ergo navem posse componi docet, cuius pars ipso in mari per artem soluta effunderet ignaram: nihil tam capax fortuitorum quam mare; et si naufragio intercepta sit, quem adeo iniquum, ut sceleri adsignet, quod venti et fluctus deliquerint? additurum principem defunctae templum et aras et cetera ostentandae pietati. (Ann. 14.3)

This seems like the idea in a comedy that one character has after a heavy night of drinking and smoking weed. One can almost see Nero jumping onto his unsteady feet, saying how brilliant the idea is and howling with laughter. This is the type of solution that *does* seem brilliant at 3AM but much less so in the morning. It is *a* solution but one that would be found in a comic play about the absurd. This is the impression Tacitus gives by having the characters debate back and forth on this. If Anicetus is now in the role previously played by Narcissus it shows that competency has fallen further in the age of Nero, both for the emperor himself and the freedmen around him.

Anicetus suggests that Nero could take advantage of the sympathy garnered by losing his mother in an accident. But, like seemingly everything about Nero, he has to make it into a show; he overcomplicates things by becoming enamored in the theatricality of the event above all else¹⁰³. For instance, could they not have put agents on the boat to kill her before and then sink the ship after? Why did they have to construct a boat that would sink itself? The fact that Nero's solution to his mother problem is to set an

¹⁰³ (Woodman, 1993) By overcomplicating the act and making it about theatricality above all Tacitus connects this incident with the upcoming Pisonian conspiracy against Nero. In that episode it is in the assassin's overly elaborate preparations that the conspiracy is discovered. Woodman asks: "What serious conspirator ever behaved like Scaevinus? In his dramatic gestures he seems almost to wish death upon himself rather than upon Nero. Yet the very implausibility of his behaviour reveals that he is less concerned with the reality of his task than with playing a role". p. 110

elaborate mechanical trap for her that would need everything to go just right to be successful seems absurd. It is like a bad theatrical production where the director is relying on special effects, unreliable winches, pulleys, or trapdoors, to pull off a successful scene¹⁰⁴. But it does point toward how afraid Nero is of his mother and that she still must have wielded considerable popularity for a son to go to such risks to make it appear an accident.

Tacitus says that Agrippina accepted Nero's invitation to visit him at Baiae even though she had heard a rumor of the danger she was in. She went because she had no choice; being accepted into the good graces of her son was the only hope she had of regaining her former glory. Here Nero has the chance to prove that he does not need a stage to act. Nero charms her at his seaside villa into letting her guard down. After Poppaea's performance, this is the first clear example of acting in this episode—as we will see, there will be others¹⁰⁵. While Nero successfully pulls off the façade (*ibi blandimentum sublevavit metum: comiter excepta superque ipsum collocata*) and gets her onto the specially constructed ship, Agrippina's attempt at performance will be decidedly less successful¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰⁴ (Southon, 2018) p. 250. "The play *Octavia* gives the most convincing explanation: the boat was not a trick boat, built with some kind of complicated mechanism, but was merely an unseaworthy boat that would be unable to survive a trip and would spring a leak". This would mean then that Tacitus has deliberately emphasized the theatrical stage aspect of the ship to suit his narrative.

¹⁰⁵ (Drinkwater, 2019) p. 181. Drinkwater finds Tacitus' narrative of the scene dubious. "I assume that Nero would not have embarked upon a complex plan to murder his mother and, to aid its completion, acted the loving innocent in her face. This Nero is the 'monster' of tradition. I further suppose that Nero and Agrippina were never alienated from each other as much as the source tradition suggests, and that by early 59 there appeared to be some possibility of rapprochement".

¹⁰⁶ (Devillers, 1995) p. 344. "Dans sa narration, Tacite insiste sur la *simulatio* : de Néron avant le naufrage, d'Agrippine après le naufrage et à nouveau de Néron après le meurtre de sa mère. Or la *simulatio* est un trait de caractère que, dans le reste des *Annales*, Tacite prête volontiers à Néron et à Agrippine".

3.2 The Ceiling Caves In

The attempted murder itself is designed to elicit the maximum amount of laughter from the reading audience:

The ship began to go on its way. Agrippina was attended by two of her friends. One of them, Crepereius Gallus, stood near the tiller. The other, Acerronia, leant over the feet of her resting mistress, happily talking about Nero's remorseful behaviour and his mother's re-established influence. Then came the signal. Under the pressure of heavy lead weights, the roof fell in. Crepereius was crushed and died instantly. Agrippina and Acerronia were saved by the raised sides of their couch, which happened to be strong enough to resist the pressure. Moreover, the ship held together.

In the general confusion, those in the conspiracy were hampered by the many who were not.

nec multum erat progressa navis, duobus e numero familiarium Agrippinam comitantibus, ex quis Crepereius Gallus haud procul gubernaculis adstabat, Acerronia super pedes cubitantis reclines paenitentiam filii et recuperatam matris gratiam per gaudium memorabat, cum dato signo ruere tectum loci multo plumbo grave, pressusque Crepereius et statim exanimatus est: Agrippina et Acerronia eminentibus lecti parietibus ac forte validioribus, quam ut oneri cederent, protectae sunt. nec dissolutio navigii sequebatur, turbatis omnibus et quod plerique ignari etiam conscios impediabant. (Ann. 14.5)

First the ceiling literally and figuratively caves in on Agrippina while she is at her most hopeful and happy, speaking joyfully about a reconciliation with her son. For a woman who has performed her whole life, she is easily taken in, fooled by Nero's virtuoso performance. This is a dramatic construct of "pulling the rug" out from under someone and changing the course of the story when they least expect it—what drama is made of. But even a lead ceiling fails to kill her, only her attendant, with a sturdy couch saving the empress. This is where the laughter begins to turn from focusing on a foolish woman to focusing on a foolish emperor. Nero's ridiculously convoluted plan has already begun to fall apart. Then the ship that was designed to sink stayed afloat. One can imagine the panic in the darkness from both those in on the plot, and those not, running around the ship wondering what to do, some trying to save the ship, some to sink it. The accomplices to the conspiracy decide to rush to one side of the ship in an attempt to tip it over, "However, they took too long to concert this improvised plan, and meanwhile others brought weight to bear in the opposite direction. This provided the opportunity to make a gentler descent into the water" (*sed neque ipsis promptus in rem subitam consensus, et alii contra nitentes dedere facultatem lenioris in mare iactus: Ann. 14.5*). Nero has now completely lost control of the management of the theatrical production, as the actors on stage forget their marks or lines. Nero had not planned for this—instead of working from one script, some of the actors in the production are working off a completely different script and contrary to the director's goal. The scene is now veering into slapstick where the actors are working for divergent purposes against each other, ensuring that nothing gets done correctly. The panicked scurrying back and forth is exaggerated physical comedy that is not a common technique in Tacitus, but effective in

showing how wrong things have gone for Nero and how ridiculous the plan was in the first place.

Despite this all is not yet lost for Nero. Agrippina is still in mortal danger as she slips into the ocean and Nero's plan will still work as long as she does not find her way back to land. So, of course, she does; in fact, the absurdity of the plan assures that she will escape back to shore. She is allowed to do this because of a case of mistaken identity. She realizes what is going on when her attendant and supposed friend Acerronia, panicking in the water, impersonates Agrippina, assuming that this would assure a quicker rescue. Her decision compounds the absurdity of the scene: Acerronia's treachery should ensure the death of the real Agrippina, but even this backfires against Nero, for the treachery ends up revealing the truth. It is a fatal mistake for Acerronia: she is greeted by Nero's agents with poles and oars and savagely beaten to death or drowns after being knocked unconscious. By playing the role of empress Acerronia unwittingly reveals Nero's plan and allows Agrippina to slip away in the darkness, realizing the full implications of the events. Once she steps back onto shore Nero's failure is complete.

The attendant's death brings further into focus the theatricality of the sequence. Almost everyone involved is acting, playing a role to disguise the truth—first Nero, then his agents on board, Acerronia in her attempt to be rescued, then Agrippina disguising her identity. These roles end up backfiring. It is a testament to Nero's acting ability and adeptness at falseness that he got his mother onto the ship in the first place, as she was warned of the treachery beforehand. But this is failed theatricality: Nero's acting ability looks foolish when his plan falls apart, while the ship that was supposed to sink ends up staying afloat. Acerronia's failed theatricality has brutal consequences. She is punished

for her ignorance of the circumstances and impersonation of the empress, but she is also successful in unintentionally protecting Agrippina. Her failed performance reveals the falseness of the entire event. While Acerronia suffers the immediate consequences, there would be just as dire consequences for Agrippina and, though delayed, for Nero.

Seeing the failure of the performances she tries a performance herself. As someone who had been performing her whole life, she goes back to what she knows best: she tries to perform for her life. Realizing what must be going on, she “decided that the only escape from the plot was to profess ignorance to it” (*solum insidiarum remedium esse <sensit>, si non intellegentur: Ann. 14.6*). This is a key moment of the sequence. She tries to outdo Nero’s performance from the dinner-party by sending her freedman Agerinus to tell Nero “that by divine mercy and his lucky star she had survived a serious accident. The messenger was to add, however, that despite anxiety about his mother’s dangerous experience Nero must not yet trouble to visit her—at present rest was what she needed” (*benignitate deum et fortuna eius evasisse gravem casum; orare ut quamvis periculo matris exterritus visendi curam differret; sibi ad praesens quiete opus: Ann. 14.6*). Just as Nero was able to fool the actor, Agrippina decides she can do the same—she better, her life depends on it¹⁰⁷.

Agrippina is counting on the fact that Nero can ignore what has happened if he is able to keep his illusion that his failure has not been discovered. She is hoping that, more than a meddling mother, what Nero fears most is the mockery and laughter of his

¹⁰⁷ (Southon, 2018) p. 253. Other than tending her wound and searching for Acerronia’s will (itself a humorous detail to mention in the chaos) Tacitus is silent on what Agrippina did after sending her message to Nero. Southon says: “I struggle to imagine that this woman who had just fought against the sea for her life, who believed that her own son had just tried to murder her, would sit and wait and twiddle her thumbs...Without doubt she was sending other messages and making plans, working out what could be salvaged from the disaster”.

audience at the failure of his plan. If she can dispel the threat of laughter, she can dispel his fear. It is potentially not even necessary to have her be ignorant to the plot; she just has to *appear* to be ignorant of it. This speaks again to the importance of performance as truth and to the power that laughter and mockery have in delegitimizing power and causing the appearance of weakness to an audience. It would be especially true for an emperor with aspirations of being an actor on stage, knowing the power of having all eyes on him. If the audience makes no indication of noticing a mistake by the actor, if there is no snickering or outright laughter, then Nero can continue with the performance as if nothing has happened. Even if the audience saw that the actor on stage forgot his lines, or made a misstep, if there is no indication of it the event has no power over the performer.

However, the failure of Nero's plan would have been a grave disappointment for Nero personally. The intricacy of the planning and theatricality of the event suggest that Nero badly wanted to prove that he was capable of pulling off such a delicate operation as this—if only for himself. He would have heard the whispers of those around him, the snickering that perhaps he was not the real power behind the throne; that he owed his position in life solely to the boldness and audacity of his mother. The collapsible ship represented an opportunity for Nero to prove that he was capable of boldness himself and that he could even be as ruthless as his mother. The threat of this snickering turning to outright laughter and mockery—potentially from his own mother—at his failure to accomplish his goal, may have been too much for him. There was also the real danger that the Praetorians would side with the daughter of Germanicus over her son unless he acted decisively.

Agrippina's only hope for survival is to forestall Nero from any thoughts of her retribution, no matter if only through laughter or mockery. However, it is too late already; her "adherence to what she imagines will be Nero's script, based on her knowledge of the true situation, is not enough: Nero is busy writing a new one"¹⁰⁸. When Agrippina's messenger, Agerinus, arrives with the "good" news for Nero about his mother's survival, Nero sees an opportunity to rewrite the situation in his favor. Tacitus says that "when Nero was told, he took the initiative, and staged a fictitious incrimination. While Agerinus delivered his message, Nero dropped a sword at the man's feet and had him arrested as if caught red-handed. Then he could pretend that his mother had plotted against the emperor's life, been detected, and—in shame—committed suicide" (*ipse audito venisse missu Agrippinae nuntium Agermum, scaenam ultro criminis parat, gladiumque, dum mandata perfert, abicit inter pedes eius, tum quasi deprehenso vincla inici iubet, ut exit<i>um principis molitam matrem et pudore deprehensi sceleris sponte mortem sumpsisse confingeret: Ann. 14.7*). Nero shows that like any good actor he is able to improvise his performance when necessary. But it is an improvisation based on desperation and fear: the threat of his mother knowing all and holding his failure over him causes Nero to cease with the façade and to challenge her openly.

It is interesting that Tacitus uses the words *scaenam* to highlight the theatricality and *confingeret* to emphasize the creative refashioning of the event. It is particularly noteworthy that the visual nature of performance theatre demands that Nero actually drop a sword at the messenger's feet, as if he had brought the sword to do the nefarious work of his mother. Nero could have simply told people what he wanted them to believe, but

¹⁰⁸ (Bartsch, 1994) p. 21

he found it symbolically important to add a visual act. As Rhiannon Ash notes “This *gladius*...smacks of a stage-prop”¹⁰⁹. This would have provoked laughter from the external audience knowing that everyone present could see that it was Nero himself who placed the sword there, not Agerinus. This is Nero rewriting the script on the fly, attempting to do with a sword prop what he had tried to do with a collapsible-ship prop. The sword prop is also continuing a theme that Tacitus seems to be using, where often a sword, or a weapon, represents failed theatricality. We saw it in the Germanicus episode (*Ann.* 1.35), this episode, and it will be shown again when Scaevinus’ dagger helps betray the Pisonian conspiracy (*Ann.* 15.54). The sword drop touches on the delicate nature of truth and performance, for the truth does not matter as long as the audience present with Nero continue to act their role without betraying the lie with laughter or mockery. Agerinus is a tool, performing a role for Agrippina, but the nature of tools is that they are unthinking and without agency; thus Nero can use the tool to perform a role for his own purpose.

However, by improvising the sword prop in front of a crowd of people, Nero is conceding that he has failed in his ultimate goal. The entire point of the absurd collapsible ship was to hide his nefarious purpose. Dropping the sword at the feet of Agerinus is in fact Tacitus’ punchline to the failure of the original plot, designed to provoke laughter from the reader who can see that all of Nero’s planning and work has come to naught. As a director and manager of events Nero has been proven a fraud and incompetent in fashioning his own narrative of events. But the sword represents a new stage of Nero’s career and a new direction for his principate. The sword represents a

¹⁰⁹ (Ash, 2021) p. 217

shrug and an acknowledgment on Nero's behalf: as *princeps* he has to worry less on staging events to serve his purpose than refashioning the message of those events. The sword is an acknowledgment that things have gone wrong, but it shows that Nero will not let events (or facts) stand in the way of his goal; the sword is an acknowledgment that the crowd might laugh in private at what has occurred, but it will forestall any public or private laughter or mockery from Agrippina at her son's failure. The emperor's ruthlessness, fear, and desperation are on full display with the clatter of the falling sword.

The idea of laughter and mockery breaking an illusion is proven further after Agrippina's death (which we will come back to). To create his own narrative of events Nero has Seneca write a speech to the senate justifying her murder. Seneca confirms the story about a plot emanating from Agrippina and pointing to Agerinus as the tool she attempted to use to kill Nero (*Ann.* 14.10)¹¹⁰. Nero and Seneca construct a smear campaign against her memory, suggesting that she had wanted to co-rule the empire and blamed her for much of the failure of Claudius' reign (*Ann.* 14.11). Tacitus goes on: "Her death, he said, was providential. And he even called the shipwreck a happy accident"¹¹¹. For even the greatest fool could not believe it accidental—or imagine that one shipwrecked woman had sent a single armed man to break through the imperial guards and fleets. Here condemnation fell not on Nero, whose monstrous conduct beggared criticism, but on Seneca who had composed his self-incriminating speech" (*publica*

¹¹⁰ (Griffin M. T., 2000) p. 76-77. "[T]he murder itself had been so clumsily carried out, that some attempt at explanation seemed necessary, for, in contrast to the secrecy that had attended Britannicus' demise, Anicetus had involved several of his navel officers, and the crowd which had gathered for the shipwreck had witnessed the arrival of Anicetus and his men at Agrippina's villa".

¹¹¹ (Drinkwater, 2019) p. 183. "[A]s Tacitus himself implies, somewhat oddly, after congratulating the state on its good fortune in the removal of Agrippina the letter refers to a 'shipwreck', stressing that it was 'accidental'. This locates the maritime disaster directly before Agrippina's death, and, presumably, attempts to counter a charge that it had been contrived".

*fortuna exstinctam referens. namque et naufragium narrabat: quod fortuitum fuisse, quis adeo hebes inveniretur, ut crederet? aut a muliere naufraga missum cum telo unum, qui cohortes et classes imperatoris perfringeret? ergo non iam Nero, cuius immanitas omnium questus anteibat, sed Seneca adverso rumore erat, quod oratione tali confessionem scripsisset: Ann. 14.11)*¹¹².

The letter fools nobody; everybody knows the truth—those who witnessed Nero throw the sword at Agerinus’ feet even *saw* the truth. But things are safer and more stable if the audience chooses to do what Agrippina did: feign ignorance. The Roman senate and praetorian guard are the audience “and since they understand the truth, they dissimulate for all they are worth. Tacitus makes it clear that none of them believes in the script Nero offers...and yet the centurions and tribunes congratulate him”¹¹³.

Thus, Tacitus suggests that truth is not the only thing sacrificed in this letter. Also sacrificed is the old voice of the emperor, Seneca himself. Tacitus’ incredulity at the letter’s contents suggests that in the background there was hidden laughter and mockery. But, once again, harkening back to the laughter at the eulogy, the laughter is not necessarily directed at Nero, but at the writer. It is the same writer, the same speaker (this time in a letter), the same incredulity at what is said, and the same laughter, if only implied. The laughter is hidden this time because Nero is no longer an unsure adolescent but a dangerous man; nor is the implied object of the laughter a dead former emperor, but

¹¹² (Drinkwater, 2019) p. 183-187. Drinkwater theorizes that Nero and Agrippina were actually attempting a reconciliation at Baiae in 59CE when Agrippina’s ship suffered an accident in which several members of her entourage were killed. In Drinkwater’s speculative reconstruction, Nero was delighted to find out his mother survived the accident, but that Seneca, Burrus and Poppaea took advantage of the situation and framed Agerinus as being an assassin. The ‘myth’ of the collapsible ship is thus perpetuated because of its closeness in time to Agrippina’s death and because it helps historians make Nero look both monstrous and incompetent. Drinkwater seems to be reaching here.

¹¹³ (Bartsch, 1994) p. 21

the lies an emperor is telling. Laughter here would be a sign to Nero that his performance is not working, that truth is overwhelming appearance, that the script itself is rotten. In silence lies consent. The increasing theatricality of Nero's reign would make the senators very much aware that they, as the audience, are also the performers and are also being watched. Once again, a certain level of private laughter is probably acceptable to Nero, actually believing the state's story of the events is not necessarily the main concern; what Nero is more concerned about are the implications that his mother was his superior and that he made for a weak figure in comparison.

Just as in the eulogy scene, the real target of this secret laughter and mockery was Seneca and his justifications. Tacitus is suggesting that Nero, who has shown his character, is not stained by the lies because he does not know any better; with no voice of his own he is simply following the voice of Seneca. The aged tutor *should* know better, however, as the philosopher who had been brought in from the start to mold the emperor and be the voice of the voiceless. Though the laughter at the speech may have been silent that does not mean that Nero did not hear the snickering. Tacitus' use of *adverso rumore* suggests an open secret that Nero would be aware of as well. Neither the laughter nor the mockery was openly directed at Nero, but he knew the strength both have of shattering illusions of strength, power, and competence. Seneca's reputation, which was key in bolstering Nero's legitimacy at the beginning of his reign was now a liability. Nero would eventually have to distance himself from the object of this destabilizing laughter, lest it rebound onto him and stain his legitimacy permanently¹¹⁴. What Tacitus is

¹¹⁴ (Griffin M. T., 2000) p. 105. Seneca would not be the only one at risk of being stained. Burrus would also have been a public face to the deceit as well. "Burrus too appreciated the importance of courting public opinion. He probably helped to organise a favourable popular reaction in Campania and Rome after Agrippina's murder".

suggesting, tongue in cheek, is what seemingly many of the audience must be whispering: that they could potentially accept matricide, but a poor rhetorical argument is a line too far.

Agrippina's actual death scene brings into focus for the external audience the upcoming fate of Seneca and others around Nero¹¹⁵. Death scenes are an important narrative technique in the *Annales*¹¹⁶. Agrippina's death is particularly revealing¹¹⁷. Even when the soldiers arrive at her villa, Agrippina still "clings in desperate belief to a performance via which she professes belief in Nero's innocence, a performance that has its basis in her actual knowledge of his guilt"¹¹⁸. She only gives up her performance when all hope is gone, pointing to her womb and saying: "Strike here!" (*'ventrem feri'*: *Ann.* 14.8). O'Gorman sees these actions of Agrippina as another reference to the mutinous soldiers that we have looked at earlier; while the soldiers display their scars to Germanicus, Agrippina points to the source of an emperor and a reminder of her motherhood, asking "that the site of memory be torn apart... The destruction of memory becomes itself a memorable act"¹¹⁹. The death, done in a shocking and grotesque way,

¹¹⁵ (Woodman, 1993) p. 118. Woodman sees the upcoming Pisonian conspiracy and the subsequent suicide of Seneca as takes on famous deaths. "'The Murder of Julius Caesar' is replaced by 'The Execution of Socrates,' and the guilty but ineffectual conspirators are entirely upstaged by the innocent but successful Seneca".

¹¹⁶ (Sailor, 2008) p. 11. "Tacitus' work fits into, and reacts to, a cultural environment in which the Stoic martyrs enjoyed admiration and fame". However, "Tacitus' work is much less enthusiastic about the martyrs than the fashion for laudatory biographies of them would indicate that others were". (p. 12)

¹¹⁷ (Devillers, 1995) p. 338. Compared to the accounts of Suetonius and Cassius Dio, Tacitus' description of Agrippina's death is more detailed and more dramatic. "Cette dramatisation prend deux formes. D'une part, Tacite souligne la popularité d'Agrippine et il décrit l'émotion du peuple à la nouvelle du naufrage (XIV, 8, 1). D'autre part, il tente de susciter une certaine compassion envers Agrippine, qui est alors traitée non plus comme une femme implacable, mais comme une victime".

¹¹⁸ (Bartsch, 1994) p. 21

¹¹⁹ (O'Gorman, 2000) p. 141

would in itself produce laughter from the external audience, but more so when it is looked at as a *comparatio*.

The number and increasing theatricality of the death scenes in the *Annales* shows the importance that Tacitus placed on them¹²⁰. He seems fascinated by the question of how one acts in the moments leading up to one's death¹²¹. It is a great tragedy that we are missing so much of the work, but particularly Nero's "tragic" death scene. We cannot know how Tacitus would have scripted this scene but there are clues when looking at the deaths of those he imitated, his literary friends. It is also instructive to look at how other sources deal with his death. Suetonius says that Nero laments "Dead! And so great an artist!" ("*Qualis artifex pereo!*")¹²²; then, after more hesitating, Nero condemns himself in Greek: "This certainly is no credit to Nero, no credit at all," and: "Come, pull yourself together!" (οὐ πρόπει Νέρωνι, οὐ πρόπει ... ἄγε ἔγειρε σεαυτόν: Suet. *Nero* 49)¹²³. He still wavers in self-pity, unable to kill himself, until he is helped by Epaphroditus, his private secretary, to stab himself in the throat. A centurion then comes in while he is dying to

¹²⁰ (Sailor, 2008) p. 22n. He is certainly not alone on this. Sailor mentions two Roman writers Fannius and Capito whose works seem to contain "nothing *but* deaths...the *exitus*-genre was the equivalent of a 'highlight reel' of a sports match".

¹²¹ (Sailor, 2008) p. 23. Tacitus' view of martyrs sometimes seems contradictory. Sailor sees no contradiction: "His strategy does not aim to reverse public enthusiasm for them but rather to suggest that you *could* say they were motivated by interests of personal prestige rather than promotion of the common good, were mainly ineffective, were short of perfect with respect to their dignity and manly courage, and had even failed to secure the lasting glory they had aspired".

(Sailor, 2008) p. 314-321. Sailor finds the coincidence intriguing that the *Annales* ends mid-sentence, at the moment of Thrasea's suicide. Although he finds it highly unlikely, Sailor says it is possible that Tacitus intentionally ended his work here as a suggestion of his own destruction by the order of the authorities. This would mean that the historian of martyrs is himself a martyr.

¹²² (Champlin, 2003) p. 51. Champlin argues that "*Qualis artifex pereo!*" is one of the most misunderstood lines in history. He believes *artifex* here means craftsman: "Nero is directing the construction of his last resting-place, a mere trench in the ground decorated with odd fragments of marble; and he is therefore an artisan...Nero is drawing attention to the contrast between the great artist he once was and the pitiful artisan he has become".

¹²³ Suetonius translations by Robert Graves (revised 2003 edition). Latin and Greek quotes from the Loeb Classical Library.

which Nero says: “Too late! But, ah, what fidelity!” (“*Sero*” et: “*Haec est fides*”: Suet. *Nero* 49). This is a scene very reminiscent of Messalina’s death, her hesitation in the garden, her assisted suicide, even the soldier standing over her, watching the moment of death. It seems probable that Tacitus would have stressed these similarities further.

O’Gorman says that Nero’s final line in Suetonius “reproaches Nero with the problems he has suffered all along, the problem of being ‘too late’ on the authorial scene, of having too many predecessors to incorporate”¹²⁴. She surmises that in Tacitus “Nero’s death was also a failure to achieve a final, decisive act: either by strong utterance or by an emblematic gesture”¹²⁵. Just as Tacitus refused to give Messalina a dignified exit, Tacitus would not have granted Nero anything different. For an emperor who needed borrowed eloquence and a voice to call his own, his death would most likely have been an anti-climactic affair and underwhelming when compared to the deaths of his literary associates, nor would it have reached the defiant nature of his mother’s end. This makes Agrippina potentially a more worthy character in Tacitus’ narrative, certainly a woman of action more manly than her effeminate son. Tacitus may very well have shown a man verging on the pathetic, trying hard to go out the great artist, but failing, as he had in his other attempts to find a strong voice. This would again connect him to Claudius’ passivity in the Messalina affair. Nero would have been desperate to connect himself to the martyr genre and to find the everlasting glory that he failed to in his reign; but Tacitus’ depiction would no doubt have been a mockery of a glorious death scene: far from sacrificing for any greater good, it would be shown as the last selfish pitiful act of a conceited man. His death and the *exempla* deaths coming before would be the final

¹²⁴ (O’Gorman, 2000) p. 161

¹²⁵ (O’Gorman, 2000) p. 161

inspiration for laughter and mockery by the external audience at Nero's expense. They would mock the man who could not even die with the fire and passion that his mother's last act showed, and they would mourn the passing of a dynasty into the fires of civil war.

Like the previous two examples of laughter and mockery in this discussion, Agrippina's entire death-sequence is rife with references to Roman theatre. One of the clearest connections to the theatre lies in Tacitus' use of speech during the scene. Poppaea's speech acts as the impetus for the event, she "resembles a Fury kindling the emperor to act...[she] evokes the opening scene of Seneca's *Thyestes*, where the Fury forces Tantalus' ghost to infect his family with his impious spirit"¹²⁶. Acerronia's impersonation of Agrippina is reminiscent of "the tragic stage: in Pacuvius' *Chryses*, Orestes and Pylades are captured in Tauris and brought before the king who decides to kill Orestes, but then each man claims to be Orestes"¹²⁷. These lend the proceedings a tragic theatrical element, but there is a comic aspect to it as well. One of the most apparent is the reversal of a certain stock character from the Greek stage; what was the clever slave stereotype in the Messalina affair, represented by Narcissus, is now the stupid slave stereotype, represented by Anicetus. Let us not forget that, though Nero will get the blame for bungling the murder of his mother, it was Anicetus with the idea of a collapsible boat, the *ingenium*, in the first place. While it was Narcissus who cleaned up Claudius' problems, Anicetus is the cause of Nero's problems. Anicetus does in the end put an end to Agrippina, but it is too late to save the theatrical illusion of a shipwreck. An audience adept at Greek and Roman theatre would be cognizant of this reversal of the stereotype and laugh at the comparison of the competency between freedmen. Once again

¹²⁶ (Ash, 2021) p. 204

¹²⁷ (Ash, 2021) p. 208

these characters are freedmen and freedwomen but the disparity in rank and class gives a similar effect. Instead of the “clever slaves” cleaning up the mess of the aristocrats above them they are making a mess of things themselves which the aristocrats bungle in the clean-up¹²⁸. The number of freedmen and freedwomen in the sequence and their importance to the narrative is also a theatrical element, with Ash stating that “Since actors generally came from lower social status, Tacitus’ repeated emphasis on the freedwoman and freedmen status of many of the participants implicitly conjures up the theatrical world and the acting profession”¹²⁹. There is even an appearance of a second Mnester, a freedman who stabs himself during the cremation of his former mistress (*Ann.* 14.9)¹³⁰. This is again a connection to acting and theatricality, with both men of the same name suffering the same violent death with their patroness. Both end their lives with a performance as well: the first Mnester by showing the scars on his body in an attempt at eliciting sympathy, while the second performs a seemingly noble act of martyrdom at the injustice of Agrippina's death, but with Tacitus wondering if it was all an act: “Either he loved his patroness, or he feared assassination” (*Ann.* 14.9)¹³¹. No act, no matter the appearance, is above suspicion in Nero’s stage-managed world.

Not long after Agrippina’s defiant death Tacitus relates another part of the story that he admits is contested. He says that Nero “inspected his mother’s corpse and praised

¹²⁸ Acerronia, though not a freedwoman, is clearly a subordinate. She fits the role of the bungling and traitorous “hanger on”.

¹²⁹ (Ash, 2021) p. 210

¹³⁰ (Devillers, 1995) p. 339. Agrippina’s funeral seems designed to instil sympathy for Nero’s mother and remind the reader of Britannicus’ funeral. “La similitude entre les deux situations souligne la monstruosité de l’empereur”.

¹³¹ (Devillers, 1995) p. 340. “il permet d’insister sur un thème du récit : soit Mnester se suicide par affection pour Agrippine et cela indique la popularité de celle-ci ; soit il craint d’être exécuté et cela souligne la cruauté de Néron”.

her figure” (*Ann.* 14.9). This is a delightful detail to add because it lends some credence to the incest rumors he had previously put forth. It also adds emphasis to the visual aspect, again vital in performance and theatricality, with Ash noting that the words “are Oedipal (or parodic of Oedipal dramas)”¹³². It shows Nero gazing at a now dead member of his audience; but while she cannot see him anymore, she can still get a performance out of him, which others around can see. Just because the audience has grown smaller the show must go on. If this scene really took place, one can imagine it being a bitter-sweet moment for Nero. He was free of his mother’s meddling, but he was also becoming increasingly isolated. Whether there was any real affection between the two anymore or not they would have always shared a bond that only family and power can forge. He would not have been an emperor without her. We can never really know if Nero was thankful for the course his mother charted for him, but for one person, Tacitus says, even in death it had been worth it: Agrippina herself. Tacitus relates a tale, probably apocryphal, that when she was told by an astrologer that Nero would become emperor but would kill her, Agrippina replied: “Let him kill me—provided he becomes emperor!” (*illa ‘occidat’ inquit, ‘dum imperet’*: *Ann.* 14.9)¹³³.

The killing of Agrippina can thus best be described as ridiculous. Ridiculous as in the Latin *ridiculus*, which for the Romans “was a dangerously ambiguous word”¹³⁴. It

¹³² (Ash, 2021) p. 207

¹³³ (O’Gorman, 2000) p. 132-133. As O’Gorman states, Agrippina is a victim of her own success; once she has reached her goal of having her son on the throne she has become a liability, “She can hark back to her former actions and remind him of what he owes her, or she can plot a new teleology, to climax in the accession of a new protégé. Both options (even if not taken) make her an object of suspicion to the emperor, who needs a different narrative of his rise to power...in this respect the empress is viewed in the same way as an imperial assassin, as one who facilitates the emperor’s accession but who may at any point enact a repetition of their greatest deed”.

¹³⁴ (Beard, 2014) p. 102

was dangerous because it could be interpreted in one of two ways, either “something that people laughed at, the butt of laughter...[or] it was someone or something that provoked people to laugh (and so it could imply something like ‘witty’ or ‘amusing’)”¹³⁵. In this case it is quite clearly the first example. But an event is only laughable in context—in this case it is the planning and the failure of it which makes it laughable, which then makes the planners themselves laughable. The laughter in this case is really towards an emperor and his audacity to attempt the ridiculous and then his audacity to lie about the ridiculous. Tacitus has said that the implied laughter was directed towards Seneca, but that is in reference to the letter and the coverup. They are laughing at a man willing to stoop to Nero’s shameful level to argue for what the people know is a lie. But for the plan itself Nero has opened himself up to plenty of ridicule. He is also losing people who he can redirect the laughter towards; Agrippina is gone, and Seneca will be too after losing much credibility in this event¹³⁶. Once Nero is alone at the top he will find hiding from the laughter that much more difficult. And as Claudius found, an emperor who is himself ridiculous, can no longer rule.

3.3 Conclusion

What makes Agrippina’s death so important for Tacitus’ narrative is what happens with Nero afterwards. The turn in the narrative suggests that severing the burden of his mother allowed Nero to rule as his artistic sensibilities always wanted. Right after his mother’s murder Nero performs as a charioteer and then soon after makes his stage

¹³⁵ (Beard, 2014) p. 102-103

¹³⁶ (Devillers, 1995) p. 337-338. In book 13, the philosopher supplants Agrippina, but two books later he is forced to commit suicide. “Cette perte progressive de pouvoir des précepteurs est d’ailleurs un indice de la détérioration du principat de Néron. Les informations relatives aux deux hommes, et plus particulièrement à Sénèque, se succèdent donc selon une gradation. Au livre XIII, le philosophe supplante Agrippine, mais deux livres plus loin, il est contraint de se suicider (XV, 60, 2-64)”.

debut, for now “There was no stopping him” (*nec iam sisti poterat: Ann.* 14.14). This allowed Nero to become the athlete and the actor that he always wanted to be—both of which allowed him to associate and define himself with mythological figures. When Nero had his mother murdered it allowed himself to connect to mythology in an even more tangible way. This probably was not his plan originally: the collapsible ship was intended to hide his connection to her death. But when he dropped the sword at Agerinus’ feet it signaled the start of Plan B: rather than hide his involvement he could make it a part of his identity—perhaps even the defining aspect of it.

Edward Champlin suggests that after his mother’s death Nero would become fascinated by the stage roles of Orestes and Oedipus¹³⁷. His passion for these characters are harder to prove though than the reaction of those who mocked him for his crime. Suetonius writes that Nero came across graffiti in Greek renaming him “Nero Orestes Alcmaeon, mother-slayer. Or put it another way: Nero killed his own mother” (Νέρων Ὀρέστης Ἀλκμέων μητροκτόνος. Νεόνηφον· Νέρων ἰδίαν μητέρα ἀπέκτεινε: Suet. *Nero* 39)¹³⁸. The boat’s failure was now complete: it appears that it was an open secret what Nero did to his mother. Some of his statues were desecrated, sometimes he was openly accused on the street of matricide—most bizarrely of all he did little to convince otherwise¹³⁹. Champlin speculates: “perhaps he didn’t wish to fan the flames of discontent, perhaps he didn’t really care. But the reason is a simpler one: Nero agreed

¹³⁷ (Champlin, 2003) p. 97. “For Nero, the golden key to the story of Orestes was not that he was a matricide, but that he was a justified matricide”.

¹³⁸ (Champlin, 2003) p. 91. Champlin’s translation of the Greek.

¹³⁹ (Champlin, 2003) p. 92. “Nero’s reaction to such attacks on his crime is remarkable. He was exceptionally lenient (*leniorem*) to those who attacked him in speech or verse”.

that he was guilty”¹⁴⁰. In this way failed theatricality leads to real theatricality on stage in the realm of the mythical.

The death of Agrippina presented an opportunity for Nero not to deny or be shamed by his actions, but to cover himself in glory and claim to be the savior of the people¹⁴¹. It represents a realization and a conscious decision that laughter and mockery have more power when the target responds with denial and tries to hide in the shadows; admitting and justifying your actions take away mockery’s power and can turn it against the very detractors trying to wield it. Champlin argues that using myth, “he both distanced the crime and clothed himself in the aura of a hero. The goal was not to prove his innocence, but to accept guilt and justify it”¹⁴².

Tacitus had a very different goal in depicting Agrippina’s death. His goal was to demythologize her death—to show a very human emperor bungling the planning of it, feeling the fear of failure and the pressure of being laughed at and mocked—potentially by the very mother who he had just failed to kill. Tacitus’ depiction of the failed murder is an attempt to expose Nero as not a god, and certainly not a hero, but a very fallible man. A man whose very fallibility would spell the doom of the principate. For while Nero’s increasingly theatrical reign may have proven popular with regular Romans, those around him were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the act and his detachment from reality.

Thus, the murder of an empress represents a pivotal moment in the *Annales*. It shows the moment that Nero fully embraces the theatrical, when truth no longer matters,

¹⁴⁰ (Champlin, 2003) p. 92

¹⁴¹ (Champlin, 2003) p. 102. “To conquer one’s mother was to conquer the earth, mother of all”.

¹⁴² (Champlin, 2003) p. 103

only performance. The truth is the performance, the performance truth. It is the most theatrical sequence in all of the *Annales*, and it is also the funniest. Tacitus uses laughter and mockery to highlight the ridiculousness and farcical nature of the events, which reflect equally onto Nero and his failing principate. For although the events may be humorous the consequences are dire for everyone involved: by failing so spectacularly in the theatricality of the murder Nero has proven that he is unable to shape events by appearance alone. He is losing control of his capacity to credibly shape narrative and it is through the implied laughter of both the external and internal audience that these cracks are able to be seen forming. The botched murder is a tacit admission of failure on Nero's part: for if he, as director, cannot shape events on a boat, how can he write the correct script for the empire?

Conclusion: Nero the Comedian

So, what in the end do we make of Tacitus' use of laughter and mockery in the *Annales*? Tacitus is a history writer but he is primarily a storyteller. To write a successful narrative he needs people to feel like they are at the events and that they have stakes in the outcome. He accomplishes this using storytelling techniques: setting the stakes involved but not giving away the resolution, having characters that we care about, and by drawing the dramatic tension out with periods of long uncertainty¹⁴³. Comedy is a natural extension of these techniques, used to make the storytelling more interesting for the reader, but also as a comparative technique to point out the absurd. The three case studies we have looked at are relatively small sections in a large narrative, but they show that for Tacitus comedy was in fact a significant part of the story, chronicling the decline of the principate first into incompetency of leadership then into civil war; he uses laughter and mockery to point out the absurd, showing a measurement of this decline and a comparative technique to the past. They are themes set to strip away the pretensions of power, to see the truth revealed.

They also provided much needed humor and enjoyment to the narrative. Mary Beard has said that a common complaint even in ancient times was “that a joke explained is a joke lost”¹⁴⁴. There is always a danger of that to some degree; explaining why something is funny or would cause laughter to either the internal or external audience can leave a reader cold. It is difficult to take a word, phrase, or joke through centuries of history and say for certain why it would provide a particular reaction in a society so

¹⁴³ This is especially true in Part I when Claudius hesitates over what to do about the growing conspiracy; and also in Part III where Nero struggles with what to do after his mother survives the shipwreck.

¹⁴⁴ (Beard, 2014) p. 12

different than ours. In a way it is like dissecting a body but missing the context of seeing that being as it was supposed to be: living, breathing, interacting with the society around it. But texts are not dead things; that is the joy of historiography, they give a sense of the living, breathing society—they are perhaps the main reason their history is not dead.

They show a complexity to Tacitus' narrative and show an underappreciated aspect of the *Annales*, how funny it can be and why.

In Part I we see Tacitus exaggerate an emperor's passivity and lack of agency by showing women and freedmen in transgressive roles of control. We see Tacitus downplay the treachery at work and the danger that Claudius was probably in to make him a figure of mockery and draw out a laugh from the reader. The first example shows laughter and mockery through inaction. It also shows how passivity can be challenged through the threat that laughter poses to power. It suggests the precarious nature of legitimacy and the very real danger that laughter and mockery could harm this and shatter the illusion of control. One gets the sense that a leader can survive being unpopular, feared, even hated, but a leader cannot survive being laughed at; it suggests a leader who cannot help but be transgressive against social norms, cannot stay on a script of which he should have full control. It suggests passivity over mastery of action and events.

In Part II we see how an emperor's laugh track emboldens him towards his future theatricality. We see an emperor who recognizes that he has an audience ready to laugh and play along with him; and we see a scriptwriter tear up his failed script and try to rewrite one that better suits the emperor's sensibilities. But we also see how laughter has badly hurt Seneca's credibility before the show has practically even started, hinting at the future trouble to come. Perhaps most of all we see how laughter both shapes and

condemns a ruler: the reaction of the audience gives Nero the courage to attempt his own path, rather than leave it in the care of Stoic wisdom.

In Part III we see the culmination of Nero's theatrical world manifested into failed theatricality. We see Nero fail in his overtly elaborate plan to make his mother's death seem an accident only to improvise with Plan B: a plan in which she had to die at all costs and a decision to make this decisive act part of his very identity. But the reader's laughter at the absurdity of the events shows that the principate has passed to a new level of performance versus reality, a level that Nero will prove unsuccessful in course correcting. Like Part I, the emperor is spurred to action by the threat that laughter and mockery can pose—by the threat of the rumors of incest with his mother, but even more damagingly, by the threat that he could be seen as a passive force in his own reign, subordinate to his mother, who put him into power. In killing his mother, he is trying to sever this connection to Claudius and the charge of subservience to his mother. This action emphasizes again how dangerous emperors and their inner circle felt laughter and mockery were to the fragile legitimacy of their rule. Laughter and mockery can shatter the illusion of control that the powerful need to maintain. This goes back to the opening example of Germanicus and the mutinous soldiers. Mockery has the ability to transcend appearance or to emphasize that it is only appearance, only a performance, not the truth, certainly not real. For an emperor to stay in control they have to maintain that performance is reality, for once that illusion is destabilized their ability to get it back and to rule is fatally compromised.

All three case studies discussed show how Tacitus relied on theatricality to make his narrative work. This is effective because performance is a visual act, as one acts on a

stage; laughter and mockery are parts of performance, themes that are strongly related to drama and the theatre. Seeing Nero's interest in theatre, it is not surprising that Tacitus relied so heavily on Greek and Roman drama to bring out these theatrical elements in his narrative. The theatrical elements would bring emphasis to an audience well versed in Greek and Roman dramas of the time. The focus on acting and roleplay in all case studies, the emphasis on stage and setting, especially the boat set, and the use of an actual audience in Part II, all conjure to mind the theatrical. It is somewhat ironic that men as different as Tacitus and Nero share an interest in this theatricality. Both men figured out the importance of using theatricality to entertain an audience, much the same way that gladiator shows did, or professional wrestling has in our own time. Amateur wrestling is not interesting to most people because it has no storylines, it takes itself too seriously and is only about the event. Professional wrestling is all about showmanship and narratives—it is more about what happens outside the ring than in it.

It is also not surprising that women and freedmen played such an important role in these three case studies. Rome was a patriarchal society with narrow beliefs of how women should act, and Tacitus had more than a hint of misogyny in his writing (though probably not much different than most Roman males of the time); this made women who went outside the social norms a convenient target to highlight the ills of a crumbling dynasty and the breakdown of societal order. Tacitus is interested in individuals who do not play their roles correctly, whether women, freedmen, or emperors; incorrect roleplaying was a dangerously transgressive element, and a symptom of a sick, dying society. The breaking of roles was incongruous for a principate that needed to show strength and stability, a connection to an illustrious past, which may or may not have ever

existed. The low status of freedmen play into the role of theatricality by associating them with others of low status, such as actors, merely playing the role of aristocrats. While the theatrical is highlighted in narratives involving “high-ranking women and the murky world of the *domus*: here broad shifts in political power affecting the outside world are often triggered by transgressive relationships within the family played out behind closed doors”¹⁴⁵. As it was a hidden world, unknown to most people, an element “of the tragic stage was invaluable for authors seeking verisimilitude for their narratives”¹⁴⁶.

Why does Tacitus deliberately choose to tell his narrative with laughter and mockery? Because it is the most effective way of highlighting the truth amongst the performance. Further along in the narrative is a telling example of this in a quick scene between Nero and the legate of Cappadocia, Lucius Caesennius Paetus. Looking for glory himself, Paetus had recklessly invaded Armenia with his forces before the famous general Corbulo could join him. Paetus would be forced to surrender and come to humiliating terms with the Parthians. Nero, not enjoying this humiliation, tries to redirect the threat of laughter and mockery that he is vulnerable to back onto Paetus, with Tacitus writing that “Paetus, back in Rome, expected the worst. But Nero contented himself with a sarcastic rebuke. He was pardoning the general immediately, he intimated, because prolonged suspense would damage so timid a person’s health” (*regressum Paetum, cum graviora metueret, facetiis insectari satis habuit Caesar, his ferme verbis: ignoscere se statim, ne tam promptus in pavorem longiore sollicitudine aegresceret: Ann.15.25*).

¹⁴⁵ (Ash, 2021) p. 200

¹⁴⁶ (Ash, 2021) p. 200

The joke is surprisingly effective because it subverts expectations in a dramatic way, both of Paetus' and the external audience's¹⁴⁷. Nero gets to mock the man for cowardice while also wanting credit for being merciful. But we see the *scurra* reveal itself in the emperor and it ends up telling us much more about Nero than it does about Paetus. While the joke is clever, jokes and mockery try to obscure by deflecting focus onto another weaker target. With the mockery Nero is revealing what he fears the most, and something that he is particularly susceptible to. Tacitus is using the joke as a comparative technique for Nero: first against his lack of military valor and experience that Caesar and Augustus were known for; even Claudius, the ultimate figure of mockery for Nero, obtained some glory in his invasion of Britain. Secondly, Nero is opening himself up to comparisons with the death scenes of his victims. Nero has shown himself to be a timid creature when confronted by danger, as Claudius had in the Messalina affair, and presumably would have again when faced with his own death scene. Tacitus is able to tell all of this with one simple joke—he is able to reveal the truth of character behind the falsity of performance. Nero is implicitly mocking himself, revealing accidentally that the joke is on him.

How does something as simple as laughter have such a power over us? It must come down to the notion that laughter and mockery have the ability of pointing out the truths that we want to obscure and dispelling the performance we try to hide behind. Performance can be comforting; but no matter how hard a person—or a principate—tries to hide their faults, laughter is always able to reveal all for the world to see. Tacitus recognizes this and uses it to show truth in the performance. To be a ridiculous figure, a

¹⁴⁷ (Griffin M. T., 2000) p. 230. "This is the second good joke Nero is permitted in the extant part of the Annals, the first being a similarly justified hit at the freedman Pallas".

figure to be laughed at, means one loses legitimacy and the authority of being able to lead.

Much of the laughter from the reader comes from the scandalous nature of the material. As Dylan Sailor says, as we read Tacitus we feel like we are getting unprecedented access to the corrupted world of privilege¹⁴⁸. It is a world of illusion, where what we see is often a trick, a mask covering the reality. We laugh when we see glimpses through the mask; we laugh to signal that we have not been tricked, and we laugh to show that we are a part of a community separate from the corrupted world of the *Annales*¹⁴⁹. Laughter is a subversive act against authority and a way to emphasize the mockery. We laugh as a form of resistance and defiance to that world—perhaps the only resistance we have to offer.

It is also a comparative technique especially useful for historical narrative. Tacitus is able to show changes in standards of normative behavior in different time periods. The reader can laugh at the comparison between the steady practicality of Augustus with the theatricality of Nero; or the changing roles of women in power and draw their own conclusions based on the outcomes of Messalina and Agrippina.

¹⁴⁸ (Sailor, 2008) p. 318. Sailor writes, “in reading his work, we become part of an imagined group of outsiders who together with him reject the fictions of the Principate and see things as they are, not as they professed to be. Privileged to share with this select group insights and information others do not, we also feel we are engaged in something vaguely naughty, as though our copy of *Annals* could be confiscated by palace agents at any moment. Our community shares also a strong sense of morality and decorum that is offended, even outraged, during almost the entire experience of reading *Histories* and *Annals*”.

¹⁴⁹ (Sailor, 2008) p. 319. Sailor talks of “Tacitean exceptionalism”, defining it as “a feeling that he, perhaps alone among Romans, went undeceived by the false appearances and hypocrisies of the Principate. This Tacitus, whom we construct as we read, is in this fashion confirmed as an ‘outsider’ and placed rather closer to us, as clear-eyed observers of ancient Rome who have no stake in actually living as Romans”.

There is another fundamental reason that Tacitus embraces the comic element of laughter and mockery and it gets to the heart of why the *Annales* has been so popular for generations. The laughter that is created by the absurdity of characters and situations makes the *Annales* a highly enjoyable tale. Annalistic history filled with dates and facts can be a dull read and does little to make anyone interested or passionate in history. Societies become fascinated with history for the theatrical element, their ability to create narratives of the past. The *Annales* succeeds because it is a coherent narrative with dramatic tension, not a list of events that happened¹⁵⁰. The reader gets to know the characters, celebrate their rise, mourn their fall. Most enjoyable of all, they get to laugh at those in power, those who demanded respect and awe, demanding no hint of mockery or malicious laughter by those in their presence; or, at the least, the readers get to peek behind the curtain and see the fallibility in their leaders of the past. Even the emperors in Tacitus' own time could get behind this message, as they could use the follies of their predecessors as favorable comparisons to them and their rule. In an autocratic society shared laughter at those in control brings people together, giving them a sense of community in a secret society of laughter and mockery. Laughter gives people a sense of empowerment when they feel like they have none and blurs the lines of class division; everyone can be mocked and the illusion of supremacy the powerful have falls away and equalizes us. It allows the powerless a feeling of superiority, for at least as long as the laugh lasts. Laughter can feel like a rebellious act, an act of resistance, stripping the superiority of the powerful away. Power is after all a symbolic structure, tenuously held

¹⁵⁰ It is well beyond the scope of this work and cannot be investigated in detail, but one wonders how much credit Tacitus' storytelling in his historiography should receive for the seemingly never-ending interest Roman history has had throughout the generations in many differing parts of the world. Tacitus' theatrical writing may have played just as significant a part in this intrigue as any Roman ruins did.

together by a societies agreement to recognize it, vulnerable to be revealed for what it is: an illusion in need of legitimacy. Laughter and mockery help to dispel this illusion. The magic that the *Annales* has had through history is allowing the reader to become the audience to a secret world, and though they have front-row seats to laugh and mock the emperor on stage, the emperor is given no such luxury of seeing his audience perform. Now, finally, the audience has the power.

A Note on Ancient Sources:

All of Tacitus' Latin quotes come from the Heubner (1994) edition. The Latin and Greek quotes from Suetonius and the *Apocolocyntosis* come from the Loeb Classical Digital Library editions.

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