Character Assassination through Conflation: The Influence of Senecan Tragedy on Historiographical Conceptions of Agrippina the Younger

A thesis

submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Classics

Tufts University

May, 2013

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Abstract

This thesis examines the particular similarities in both language and characterization which exist between multiple female characters in the tragedies of Seneca the Younger and the depiction presented by later historians, most prominently Tacitus, of Agrippina the Younger. The work is divided into three chapters, each dealing with a rhetorical stereotype in which the historical portrait of Agrippina is cast. These stereotypes are then examined with an eye toward similar characterizations in Senecan tragedy. In regard to the similarities between these texts, this work argues that Seneca designed these associations for Agrippina due to the rivalry that developed between the two at the onset of Nero's reign. The delicate relationship between Agrippina and Seneca as powerful members of the imperial court is discussed, with particular focus on why Seneca would choose to attack the woman to whom he owed his recall from exile and position as tutor to Nero.

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Introduction

Theater and politics have been intermingled since at least the earliest literary examples which survive to date. Sophocles invokes the conflict between the Athenians and the Spartans leading to the Peloponnesian War when he has Teucer challenge Menelaus over the burial rights of Ajax, "Σπάρτης ἀνάσσων ἦλθες, οὐχ ἡμῶν κρατῶν" (*Ajax* 1102). Aristophanes revolves the entire plot of his *Lysistrata* around the same war, and he even includes a Spartan wife among the female conspirators. These examples are but two among many, and roughly half a millennium later Seneca continues the tradition established by these Athenian playwrights. Scholarship within the past few decades has examined plays of Seneca, such as the *Thyestes*[1] and *Oedipus*[2], as expressions of political sentiment dealing with Nero, both his pupil and his master. Left largely untouched, however, except in tangential cases, has been an examination of how Seneca's tragedies deal with a possibly more influential figure on the life of the author: the emperor's mother, Agrippina the Younger.

The characterization of Agrippina[3] which survives from antiquity is on the whole negative, not dissimilar from that of her son or her brother Caligula. Dynastic murder, conspiracy, intrigue, and incest are all ascribed to her by various sources. Correlative to this, Seneca appears to relish topics of incest, fratricide, infanticide, and political conspiracy in writing his tragedies. One factor which renders Seneca's topics for tragedy mysterious is the lack of knowledge about the personal life of the author, despite the fact that he held a

[1] William M. Calder, III, "Secreti Loquimur: An Interpretation of Seneca's Thyestes," in *Seneca Tragicus: Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama*, ed. A.J. Boyle (Berwick: Aureal Publications, 1983), 184-198.
[2] D. Henry and B. Walker, "The Oedipvs of Seneca: An Imperial Tragedy," in *Seneca Tragicus: Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama*, ed. A.J. Boyle (Berwick: Aureal Publications, 1983), 128-139.
[3] Unless specifically noted otherwise, the name Agrippina without any further clarification will refer to the wife of Claudius and mother of Nero.

position of highest prominence in the court of Nero and wrote extensively on philosophical matters.

Other mysteries also surround these tragedies. A great debate exists over whether they were meant to be staged or whether they were only meant for small, private audiences. This question is relevant to the political motivations of these plays because their impact would have been broader if presented to a wider audience, but they would have also been more perilous to their author if dissent were detected. As the discussion currently stands, the contention that Seneca wrote these tragedies only to be recited has been discredited[4], and, at the very least, staging the plays would not have been out of the realm of possibility in early imperial theater[5].

Another question concerns when the plays were written. Seneca's time in exile is an enticing assumption at first because he would have had time to write, but Calder states succinctly and elegantly that "Seneca did not write tragedies because he was bored. He had something compelling to say." [6] Calder then posits that the 50s would have been a ripe time for Seneca to write his tragedies, but it is worth considering whether Seneca would have chosen to engage in politically fecund tragedy following the death of Burrus in 62 CE. At this time he partially withdrew from public life until his death in 65 CE, which was brought about by Nero associating him with the Pisonian conspiracy.

It is important to understand that, even though Seneca's tragedies and two tragedies erroneously ascribed to him are the only extant works of the genre in Latin to survive, Rome had a long, rich history of staging dramatic tragedies. A.J. Boyle gives an

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[4] See Hollingsworth, Anthony, "Recitational Poetry and Senecan Tragedy: Is There a Similarity?" *The Classical World* 94.2 (2001): 135-144.
[5] See Kragelund, Patrick, "Senecan Tragedy: Back on Stage?" *Classica et mediaevalia* 50 (1999): 235-247.
[6] Calder (1983) 184.

extensive account of the tragic genre in Rome[7], but for the purposes of this exercise a brief overview will suffice. Tragedy is first attested in the third century BCE first from the author Livius Andronicus who wrote a play to be performed at the *Ludi Romani* in 240 BCE[8]. The next Roman tragedian known to modern scholars is Gnaeus Naevius, credited with writing the first *fabula praetexta* (historical play) also in the third century BCE. The *fabula praetexta*, though considered a subset of tragedy, survives for modern readers only in the Flavian *Octavia*.

Tragedy continued to flourish during the Republic with authors like Pacuvius and Accius during the second century BCE leading into the turbulent first century. In the imperial period, Augustus patronized the theater, featuring the *Thyestes* of Varius in his triumph over Antony, a move which Boyle characterizes as bold because of the anti-tyranny sentiments in the play[9]. His successors however proved less indulgent, and only two plays are reported to have been written under Tiberius, exposing both authors to sentences of capital punishment because of a perceived subversiveness in the eyes of the emperor (Suet. *Tib.* 61.3, Dio 58.24.3). This later atmosphere extended to that under which Seneca wrote. Thus he would have known the dangers, but his prominent position with Nero and the motives of that emperor likely provided him with some cover against imperial sanction.

In regard to Agrippina, even with the difficult questions concerning Seneca and the writing of his tragedies, several notable correlations exist between the female characters Seneca chooses to portray, especially in relation to the manner in which he portrays them, and the later assumptions and accusations associated with the empress. The charge of incest is simultaneously both the most valid accusation and an incredibly overextended one.

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[7] Boyle, A.J., *Roman Tragedy* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
[8] Boyle (2006) 28.
[9] Boyle (2006) 161-2.

As the most valid accusation, Agrippina most certainly committed incest in the minds of the Romans by marrying her paternal uncle Claudius, an act which required a change in the law for it to be permissible (Suet., *Claudius* 26; Tac., *Ann.* 12.7). Beyond this, however, before and after her marriage to Claudius, Agrippina faced charges of incest with her brother Caligula and with her son Nero respectively. The charge against Agrippina for committing incest with Nero is most peculiar because different sources either report that Agrippina was the initiator, Nero was the initiator, or both were guilty[10].

The significance of this charge stems from the fact that Seneca chose to write a tragedy about the Theban king Oedipus who murdered his father and married his mother. A.J. Boyle opens his commentary on Seneca's *Oedipus* by stating:

> Seneca's *Oedipus* is a work which matters. It is the only ancient Roman play to survive – indeed excluding the youthful Julius Caesar's lost *Oedipus*, it is the only ancient Roman play attested – on one of the most important and enduring myths of European intellectual history[11].

This declaration frames the question of this inquiry well because it forces readers to question the myriad reasons why Seneca's *Oedipus* does, in fact, matter. While Boyle goes on to give an extensive list of reasons why this play should be considered critically, he avoids delving into why Seneca, nearly uniquely among Romans, would choose to write a play which differs in some respects drastically from its predecessor by Sophocles. The most striking difference between the Senecan version and the Sophoclean version is the death of Jocasta. Her command to herself that "hunc, dextra, hunc pete uterum capacem, qui virum

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[10] Suetonius attributes the desire to Nero (*Nero* 28.2), while Dio blames Agrippina (*Roman History* 61.11.3-4). Tacitus reports that different sources labeled one or the other as the instigator without making a judgment (*Ann.* 14.2).
[11] Boyle, A.J., *Seneca Oedipus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), ix.

et natos tulit" (*Oedipus* 1038-40) is echoed later in the reported speech of Agrippina at her death communicated by the chorus in *Octavia* (370-2) and by Tacitus in his account of her final moments (*Ann.* 14.8.21)[12].

The question here becomes complicated because clearly an intersection exists in this case between theater and history. The question which arises then is whether Seneca intended the death-command of his Jocasta to parallel Agrippina's supposed final words or if later historians imitated the play in their histories for dramatic effect. The lack of contemporary historical sources renders this question difficult for modern readers. The language of Tacitus, who is writing a half century later, clearly shows the influence of *Oedipus*, and Dio was either influenced by the play, Tacitus' own writing, or both. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Tacitus would have relied solely upon a play to inform his view of the death of Agrippina. Tacitus took his reputation as an historian seriously, and he often refers to multiple sources for his information.

Furthermore, another historically-minded text also transmits these lines from Jocasta to Agrippina. *Octavia*, the sole surviving example of the Roman *toga praetexta*, deals with the divorce and subsequent exile of Nero's first wife, events which occurred three years after the death of Agrippina. The dating of the *Octavia* to the early Flavian period[13] suggests that the author of that play was a near contemporary with Agrippina and thus would have had a more direct link with the rumors and reports surrounding her death at the time. All things considered, the author makes a strong attempt to mimic Senecan language as evidenced by the attribution of the play to Seneca. The transmission of the

[12] Boyle, *Oedipus*, ad 1036-9. Boyle does note the similarity of the language in these three texts, and he posits the influence of *Oedipus* on the *Octavia* and on Tacitus, but he makes no claim as to whether the actual event of Agrippina's murder would have influenced Seneca's writing the play.
[13] Boyle, *Octavia*, xvi.

lines then could have been meant to reflect a Senecan *topos* rather than convey an historical truth. All of this reveals a certain circularity of investigation in this enterprise, and a primary task in this exercise is to plausibly demonstrate the chain of influence. Regardless, though, of how the events of Agrippina's death actually unfolded, Seneca could only have further encouraged the association of Agrippina with incest by his innovations in *Oedipus*.

Another charge against Agrippina arose from her son in trying to explain her death. Tacitus reports that Nero covered up his guilt in her death by claiming that in fact she had been conspiring against him, and when her plot failed she committed suicide in shame (*Annales* 14.10-11). Tacitus further implicates Seneca in the plot by claiming that he wrote the letter to the Senate which reported these events. Nero, no doubt, hoped that this account of events would take hold because of his mother's reputation for such scheming. She had been exiled by Caligula for a supposed plot against him, and the rumor took hold that she was responsible for the death of Claudius as well. These rumored plots coupled with that against Nero, which he and Seneca tried to establish, recall the Roman antipathy toward women characterized as *duces feminae*. In the most literal sense, these women actually served as commanders on the battlefield, including Boudica, Plancina who was implicated in the death of Germanicus, and Agrippina's mother due to her actions in Germany. Agrippina never actually found herself on the field of battle, but her attempts to make herself "imperii sociam," (*Ann.* 12.37, a partner in rule) were transgressive enough of traditional Roman gender roles to earn her a similar depiction. Considering her lack of actual military command, this association brings two more of Seneca's tragedies into consideration.

Medea is the archetype of infanticide, and her murder of the Theban royal family only further ties Agrippina to her. In his *Medea*, Seneca creates a woman driven mad by the betrayal of her husband Jason. Considering the rumors already addressed which claimed Agrippina as the initiator of incest with Nero, he would assume a double role in this play as both Jason and the victimized children. Naturally, the end result of this play, namely infanticide, did not occur, but the implication would have nonetheless remained that Agrippina had been a danger to her son and to the entirety of the imperial household through her scheming. Similarly, Seneca would have also raised eyebrows concerning Agrippina by writing *Agamemnon*. Suetonius and Dio both report that after Agrippina's murder, graffiti blaming Nero for the crime began to appear around the city (*Nero* 39.2) (*Roman History* 62.16.2).

More puzzling than this, however, is that Suetonius also reports that Nero "inter cetera cantauit Canacen parturientem, Oresten matricidam, Oedipodem excaecatum, Herculem insanum" (*Nero* 21.3, among others performed as Canace giving birth, Orestes the matricide, blinded Oedipus, and raging Hercules). Aside from Canace, each of these characters figures directly or indirectly into Senecan tragedy, which indicates that even if Nero were not acting in Seneca's tragedies, he may have had some knowledge that his tutor was writing them. For the purpose of this investigation, this leads to the hypothesis that Seneca certainly had Agrippina in mind when writing these two tragedies. *Medea* need not have been written after the death of Agrippina because Seneca could have very well written it during the power struggle between the two for influence over Nero. *Agamemnon*, on the other hand, appears to represent a shift in the imperial strategy of blaming Agrippina for her own death after a botched plot against the emperor by tacitly implying that Nero was responsible but that he was justly motivated considering her purported murder of Claudius.

A final *topos* which the Agrippina of Tacitus and *Octavia* resembles is that of the *saeva noverca*. In this case, Agrippina is depicted as carrying on the tradition of her great-grandmother Livia in supporting her son over the son of her husband for the succession to the empire. Influencing the portrayals of both women as wicked stepmothers is a broad tradition of the *saeva noverca* as a literary and rhetorical trope. Under the influence of Virgil and Ovid, this trope began to encompass the Roman goddess Juno so that by the time of Seneca, this identity had become well established for the goddess. Seneca then relies on this tradition in the prologue of his *Hercules Furens*, where Juno appears as the speaker plotting against her stepson Hercules. Unlike the other plays mentioned, *Hercules Furens* has a definitive *terminus ante quam* of 54 CE because it is parodied in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*, which was written shortly after the death of Claudius. This early date significantly decreases the likelihood that *Hercules Furens* was originally meant with propaganda against Agrippina in mind. The work which parodies it however was unequivocally harsh to the previous ruler, and hidden within the insults against Claudius are equally scathing condemnations against Agrippina. Through this parody then, Seneca could have intended a rethinking of his mythological wicked stepmother as a proxy for the wicked stepmother in the imperial *domus*[14].

As a final note, the difficulty in establishing the chain of influence between theater and historiography in this case has been addressed. It does not help that the historical record for Agrippina, similar to many women in antiquity, is somewhat spotty. Pliny the Elder, the only surviving source contemporary with the life of Agrippina, makes references to her concerning the breech-birth of Nero (*Naturalis Historia* 7.46) along with other

[14] The structure of this thesis, with its division into examinations of Agrippina's image as *incesta*, *dux femina*, and *saeva noverca* must be credited to Judith Ginsburg, "Agrippina and the Power of Rhetorical Stereotypes," in *Representing Agrippina* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), 106-32.

unrelated mentions. The loss of Pliny's *Historia* robs modern readers of a contemporary history of the reigns of Claudius and Nero, though they are cited by surviving authors. For the purposes of this study, the loss of another contemporary work is of even greater significance. Cited by both Pliny in his *Naturalis Historia* and Tacitus in the *Annales,* the memoirs of Agrippina served as an inside perspective on the rumors and controversies within the imperial *domus*. While they no doubt represented a sort of justification for Agrippina's actions, they would have provided the only counterbalance to an otherwise unanimously hostile representation in literature[15].

Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio include her in their histories and biographies when necessary, but the loss of Tacitus' books on the early years of Agrippina's life and Suetonius' focus on writing specific lives rather than methodical history leave gaps in modern understanding. Nevertheless, what history does transmit is a healthy dose of antipathy towards Agrippina as a powerful woman. Of these three extant sources, one stands out as singularly important, both in terms of proximity to the events and relevance of content. Besides these critical distinguishing factors, the *Annales* of Tacitus also have a stylistic component which renders them of greater importance than Suetonius and Dio. Much scholarship has been dedicated to illustrating the literary, rhetorical, and even theatrical elements within the works of Tacitus[16]. Tacitus' heightened awareness of the power of these elements within historical texts for creating impressions and associations for his audience renders him the most appropriate source for maintaining the stereotypes first planted in Seneca's tragedies. In regard to certain associations, the relationship between the texts of

[15] Josephus is the sole outlier among surviving authors in that he does not report the poisoning of Claudius as fact. His tone nonetheless represents disinterested neutrality more than apology for Agrippina. He also does not speak of her at any great length. (*A.I.* 22.8.1-2)

[16] See *Tacitus Reviewed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) by A.J. Woodward for a compilation of several such works over the past three decades.

Seneca and Tacitus appear almost like a dialogue on morality. Where one creates a moral paradigm through a novel telling of myth, the other finds the applicability of said paradigm in his conception of history.

Recognizing this historiographical tendency, Barrett begins his book on Agrippina by placing her in the context of her powerful female predecessors in Rome such as Fulvia the wife of Antony, Livia, and Agrippina's own mother of the same name[17]. This context reveals that even before Agrippina began her career as imperial princess and empress, a mold already existed in which male historians and other writers would force her to fit. Despite this and despite his political opposition to Agrippina, Seneca's association of Agrippina with multiple female mythological figures both supported and undermined the ability to fit Agrippina to this mold. He supported the mold through his largely negative portrayal of Agrippina, as was typical of powerful women[18], but the diverse characters he linked to her endowed her image with a multifaceted character which reveals itself through her cunning, resolution, and the depicted affection for her by the people. A prime example of this comes from both *Octavia* and Tacitus when they describe her survival of the shipwreck, the willingness of the people to help her to shore, and the crowds assembled at her villa to pray for her well-being (*Oct.* 350-5, *Ann.* 14.5&8). Regardless of his intentions, the numerous correlations between Seneca's tragedies and the associated misdeeds of Agrippina coupled with the clear influence of his work on at least one ancient historian proves that Senecan tragedy had an enduring effect on the legacy of one of the most influential figures of the later Julio-Claudian period.

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[17] Anthony Barrett, *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 1-39.
[18] For Agrippina Maior as the exception to the rule, see McHugh, Mary, "Ferox Femina: Agrippina Major in Tacitus's Annales," *Helios* 39.1 (2012): 73.

Chapter One: Agrippina as *Incesta*

The prevalence of incest in the narrative concerning Agrippina is striking. It was not uncommon for aristocratic women, especially those of the imperial family, to fall victim to characterization as unchaste and adulterous. Julia the Elder, Julia the Younger, Valeria Messalina, and Claudia Octavia all come to mind as examples of early imperial women whose reputations were maligned with accusations of adultery and licentiousness which resulted in their successive exiles and/or deaths. None of these women, however, faced the charge of incest which permeates the entire narrative of Agrippina's life. This is not to say that Agrippina was unique among Roman aristocratic women in being charged with this crime, but it demonstrates the comparative rarity of accusing someone of incest as opposed to simple sexual depravity. In her monograph on the representation of Agrippina, Judith Ginsburg remarks that, "The emphatic position of incest in Agrippina's profile as sexual transgressor marks her off from her predecessors in sexual crime." [19] Thus Agrippina's reputation as an incestuous woman separates her from the more generic stereotype of the female sexual deviant. The question which remains, however, is from where this reputation of incest arose.

Agrippina's marriage to her uncle Claudius provides a concrete and universally attested example of her incestuous activity. Nevertheless, for both Claudius and Agrippina, the historical record presents a decision based upon political expediency rather than passion (*Ann.* 12.2-3), and the fact that no children resulted from this marriage despite Agrippina's relative youth indicates that the sexual aspect of this marriage was eclipsed by

[19] Ginsburg, Judith, *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 119.

the political[20]. Despite these intricacies of the marriage, it still stands that the law had to be changed to allow for it, indicating its status as taboo in Roman society. This marriage was nonetheless neither the first nor the last time that accusations of incest surrounded Agrippina. Both Dio and Suetonius mention that Agrippina began her career of incest with her brother, the emperor Caligula (Dio 59.22.6, Suet. *Caligula* 24). Dio refers to this merely in passing while reporting on Marcus Lepidus, the widower of Caligula's sister Drusilla, whom Caligula executed following the discovery of a conspiracy which also involved Agrippina and Livilla.

Suetonius gives somewhat more detail about the relationship between Caligula and his sisters, but the bulk of his narrative deals with Drusilla. He divides the chapter between Caligula's relationship with Drusilla in life and his actions toward her after her early death. Near the end of this account, he returns to Agrippina and Livilla nearly as after thoughts saying, "reliquas sorores nec cupiditate tanta nec dignatione dilexit," (*Cal.* 24.3, he did not love his other sisters with the same passion or honor). In a section which begins by claiming that the emperor had inappropriate relationships with his sisters, Suetonius names only Drusilla and makes only a perfunctory statement about the other two, indicating that if there was talk about incest in the imperial household, the culprits most likely would have been Caligula and Drusilla, with Agrippina and Livilla guilty by association. The inclusion of Agrippina and Livilla in such a rumor could easily have been the product of Agrippina's later reputation following her marriage to Claudius.

Another cause for doubt about this claim concerning Agrippina is that Tacitus is silent on the matter. While the loss of all of the books concerning the reign of Caligula could

[20] Suetonius offers a more licentious depiction of the formation of this marriage which lacks details of the Tacitean account such as the debate of the freedmen and Agrippina's arrangement of the marriage between Nero and Octavia (Suet. *Claudius* 26).

easily account for this discrepancy, Tacitus makes a special mention of certain sexual crimes in Agrippina's past which he indicates could have led to rumors about her attempts to seduce Nero as her power faded (Tac. *Ann.* 14.2). In this passage he specifically brings up the name Lepidus as "puellaribus annis stuprum," (the disgrace of her girlish years) but unlike Dio he makes no link between Agrippina's adultery with Lepidus and her incest with Caligula. Considering that Tacitus here is explaining precedents for her attempts at incest with her son, this omission is significant.

This passage bridges the gap between the accusations of Agrippina's youth and those of her later life. All three of the surviving historical sources speak of the presumed incest between Agrippina and Nero. Tacitus presents the issue as a matter up for debate by citing the differing accounts of two contemporary historians. That is not to say that he presents the two sides on equal footing because he states that the account of Cluvius, which designates Agrippina as the initiator of the incest, echoes popular belief. Even this he qualifies, however, by claiming that such belief could merely stem from her reputation based on her past use of sex as a political tool. Suetonius and Dio dwell less upon the issue, and neither mentions different or conflicting sources. The two differ as to who initially sought the incest, with Suetonius blaming Nero and Dio incriminating Agrippina. They also differ in their certainty about the incident(s). Dio questions whether such a thing ever happened (62.11.4), but Suetonius writes that the act was known by all because "libidinatum inceste ac maculis uestis proditum affirmant," (*Nero* 28.2, they confirm that he committed incest and that this was proven by his stained clothing) after the two would ride together in a litter.

A final matter relevant to any potential incest between Nero and Agrippina remains. The three authors all remark upon this final act of quasi-incest where Nero looks upon the

recently dead corpse of Agrippina and remarks upon her beauty. Once again, Tacitus presents the issue as one which some historians substantiate while others deny it without lingering long on the subject (*Ann.* 14.9). Suetonius gives more detail in saying that Nero actually handled her limbs, praising some and criticizing others (*Nero* 34.4), while Dio actually provides a quote of the emperor, "οὐκ ᾔδειν ὅτι οὕτω καλὴν μητέρα εἶχον" (61b.14.2, he said "I did not realize I had such a beautiful mother"). Since Tacitus remains ambivalent about this incident, the focus falls upon Suetonius and Dio. Anthony Barrett, in his book *Agrippina*, argues that the quote provided by Dio, which indicates the emperor was not familiar with his mother's body, demonstrates that the incest did not actually occur[21]. The account of Suetonius renders the issue more ambivalent because Nero's handling of his mother's limbs signifies a certain level of comfort with her body, but the irregularity of such a practice in general makes it difficult to come to any sort of conclusion about it.

Now that the instances of Agrippina's recorded incest have been enumerated and put into relief based on the discrepancies and disagreements of the surviving historical sources, the focus of this discourse must shift to the question of where such rumors could have arisen. The incomplete state of the historical narrative along with the well-known and established biases of historians in Roman society[22], especially towards imperial women, requires consideration that these accusations come from sources that may have distorted the historical reality. It is here that Seneca's relevance comes into play for the first time. A recurrent problem in the study of Seneca's tragedies is the fact that the dates of their composition are unknown. Theories about when the plays would have been written abound, but none have definitive authority. John Fitch produced some noteworthy findings on the dating of Seneca's plays by examining the shortening of the vowel *o* at the end of certain

[21] Barrett, *Agrippina*, 183.
[22] See Intro. pg. 6.

nouns and verbs along with the instances of internal pauses in the middle of a single line[23]. By arguing that these pauses demonstrate increased comfort with verse composition and by demonstrating that such renowned playwrights as Sophocles and Shakespeare have higher instances of internal pause in their later works, Fitch finds that these methods of inquiry put *Oedipus* among Seneca's earlier tragedies[24], though he concedes that the dating is purely relative, with no indication of fixed dates for the plays[25].

Even beyond the limitations of relative versus absolute dating, this methodology is challenged by two other factors. The first deals with the technique itself. The analysis of the plays of Shakespeare and Sophocles, for both of whom the dating of composition is better understood than for Seneca, demonstrates that variations in the sense pauses has a margin of error between plays composed in proximity to one another. Therefore, anything less than a 5% difference in the number of midline sense pauses compared to total sense-pauses is inconclusive in terms of chronology[26]. Furthermore, the plays of Shakespeare present another complication in that his historical plays follow a parallel track to his other tragedies in the growth of the frequency of sense pauses. The frequency in the historical plays is considerably less than in the other tragedies, but it does increase roughly with their own chronology[27]. Another even more troubling difficulty for Fitch's argument is the complete lack of substantiation in the plays of either Aeschylus or Euripides. In the case of Aeschylus, Fitch remarks that his corpus lacks the number of trimetric verses to be

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[23] John G. Fitch, "Sense-Pauses in Seneca, Sophocles, and Shakespeare," *The American Journal of Philology* 102.3 (1981), 289-307.
[24] *Agamemnon* is also placed among the early plays, which will become significant in the following chapter concerning Agrippina's stereotype as the *Dux Femina*.
[25] Fitch (1981) 307.
[26] Fitch (1981) 292-3; 299-300.
[27] Fitch (1981) 298-301.

statistically significant[28]. Euripides proves a greater challenge because of the large corpus of surviving works and their total non-correspondence to Fitch's argument. Fitch's analysis shows that the percentage of sense pauses in the middle of the line versus all sense pauses increases and declines in stages throughout his career in contrast to Sophocles and Shakespeare[29]. This list of complications signifies that Fitch's theory is far from airtight, and, while not deserving to be completely disregarded, it should be approached cautiously.

Despite the lack of specific dating, R.G.M. Nisbet claims *Oedipus* must have been written before the murder of Agrippina and even before any rumors of incest between Nero and Agrippina arose[30]. He overextends his argument about the dating of *Oedipus* by dismissively claiming that Seneca had no political motivations in writing *Oedipus* and that the lines of Jocasta just before her death are borrowed from a lost version of *Phaedra* by Sophocles. These conclusions are inelegant, unsubstantiated, and baffling because they do not even form an integral part of his greater argument. His central argument deals with the composition of *Thyestes* and the contemporary allusions for that play. Based on Fitch's sense pause evidence and the usage of the short *o*, he argues for a later date for *Thyestes* than the other tragedies besides *Phoenissae*. The short *o* data is somewhat more convincing than the sense pause data if only because of how much more striking it is. Measuring the occurrences of a short *o* replacing a long *o* at the end of words such as first person verbs and gerunds points toward an exceptionally large increase in the phenomenon in both *Thyestes* and *Phoenissae* compared to the other six authentic plays[31]. What this analysis does not indicate, however, is any significant difference between the other plays, casting some doubt

[28] Fitch (1981) 294.
[29] Fitch (1981) 295-6.
[30] R.G.M. Nisbet, "The Dating of Seneca's Tragedies, with Special Reference to Thyestes," *Papers of the Leeds Latin Seminar* 6 (1990), 99.
[31] Fitch (1981) 303-5.

on Fitch's division of *Oedipus*, *Phaedra*, and *Agamemnon* into an earlier group than *Troades*, *Medea*, and *Hercules Furens*.

To address Nisbet's claim that Seneca modeled Jocasta's death on that of Phaedra in Sophocles, this argument runs contrary to scholarship which shows that Seneca sought to make his plays reflective of a Roman world. A.J. Boyle deals directly with Seneca's *Oedipus* in his book *Tragic Seneca*. He notes how acts two and three completely diverge from the corresponding events in Sophocles, but even beyond that, he points to the focus upon two themes critical to Roman ideology: extispicium and law[32]. Unlike Sophocles, who presents Tiresias as already knowing the cause of the plague, Seneca has Tiresias and his daughter, who is not present in Sophocles, perform an extispicium which proves fruitless. Boyle interprets this change in the plot as representative of the futility of Roman institutions: "what (the audience) witnesses quite specifically are empowerment mechanisms of the Roman state – divine consultation, sacrifice, extispicy – major institutionalised Roman practices, disintegrating, as the whole state has, under the impact of Oedipus' perversion."[33] Moreover, he notes that legal language permeates the play from beginning to end with the final result that the law itself also appears to break down. "Within this cycle of sin Oedipus' 'guilt' is notoriously problematic. It is also central to the play's dramatization of imperial impotence. Oedipus is and is not guilty."[34] That Seneca modified his play so radically from the Sophoclean version and impregnated it with themes and motifs so central to Roman identity reveals that he was not content to merely reproduce Greek drama in Latin.

Seneca also changed the role of Jocasta in the play. Unlike Sophocles, who has Jocasta enter and exit in the middle of the play and commit suicide offstage, Seneca brings

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[32] A.J. Boyle,*Tragic Seneca* (London: Routledge, 1997), 94.
[33] Boyle (1997) 97.
[34] Boyle (1997) 99.

her to the forefront. She enters in the first act, bringing an end to Oedipus' soliloquy midline so that in the same line he ends with the word "parentes," and she begins by addressing him as "coniunx" (*Oed.* 81, spouse). This brief exchange brings the audience's attention immediately to the foregone conclusion of the play, and it emphasizes the magnitude of incest over the patricide of which Oedipus will also be found guilty. Seneca then returns Jocasta to the stage during the final act to carry out her suicide, not by hanging as in Sophocles, but by stabbing herself in the womb, "qui virum et natos tulit" (*Oed.* 1039, which bore a husband and sons). This line, which immediately precedes Jocasta's death, contributes a large component toward understanding the relationship between Seneca and later writers about Agrippina.

To the contrary, however, Nisbet claims that the *ventrem feri* of Tacitus "is a commonplace of declamation[35]," in an attempt to deemphasize the possible influence of Seneca on this line. This treatment of the two texts alone, however, fails to recognize the other relevant works written in between *Oedipus* and *Annales* which mimic this very quote. In the context of the murder of Agrippina, the tragic *fabula praetexta* titled *Octavia* is patently relevant. Attributed to Seneca, but almost certainly not written by him[36], the play deals with the divorce, exile, and eventual murder of Nero's wife and stepsister, Octavia, the daughter of Claudius. Tacitus begins his treatment of Agrippina's murder with Poppaea complaining that Nero will not divorce Octavia and marry her because of the influence of his mother. (*Ann.* 14.1) This telling of events is problematic due to the timing of Agrippina's death in 59 CE as it correlates to that of Octavia almost immediately following her divorce

[35] Nisbet 99.
[36] The belief that Seneca did not write the play is nearly unanimous, but, as with Seneca's plays, dating it is an issue. See Boyle, *Octavia*, xiii-xvi, where he discusses the issue at length in the introduction to his translation and commentary on the play. He ultimately argues for a date in the early Flavian period, likely under Vespasian.

in 62 CE[37]. Nevertheless, *Octavia*, like Tacitus, holds Nero's passion for Poppaea to blame for the disturbances in the imperial household. Furthermore, despite the action of the play occurring three years after the death of Agrippina, an entire choral ode is dedicated to describing her final hours of life, (*Oct.* 309-376) and her ghost figures as a speaking role in the very middle of the play (*Oct.* 593-645).

For the purposes of this chapter, the choral ode is most relevant because its subject matter overlaps with that of Tacitus in book XIV of *Annales*. Considering differences of genre, the two should not be expected to match completely, and indeed they do not. *Octavia* focuses far more on the pathos of the moment for Agrippina; whereas, Tacitus, with his thematic characterization of Agrippina as *atrox* (fierce) and as beginning a "quasi virile servitium," (*Ann.* 12.7, an almost manlike imposition of servitude) renders her as calculating and, one might even venture, courageous until the end. Nonetheless, the play serves as a crucial middle point for the transmission of Agrippina's death quote from Seneca to Tacitus. It maintains the sense of Seneca, as well as Tacitus, but even this work, which is nearly contemporary with Seneca, changes the wording.

Unlike Seneca's Jocasta, Agrippina, as relayed by the choral ode, does not ask that her *uterus* be struck, but more similarly to Tacitus the word appears outside her direct quotation, "caedis moriens illa ministrum rogat infelix, utero dirum condat ut ensem: 'hic est, hic est fodiendus' ait 'ferro, monstrum qui tale tulit!" (*Oct.* 368-372, as she dies, the unfortunate one asks the servant of death that he plant his sword in her womb. She says, "here it is, here is that which must be pierced with iron, that which bore such a monster!).

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[37] Much has been made of this lapse in time. Some questioning of the events and their causes is in order because of this, but, at the same time, focusing upon it too much has led some astray. See Alexis Dawson, "Whatever Happened to Lady Agrippina?" *The Classical Journal* 64.6 (1969), 253-267, for an amusing and highly speculative rewriting of the murder of Agrippina based around certain narrative disjunctions in the Tacitean account, including this gap in time.

The slight shift of language does not obscure the evident similarity of this quote to Seneca. The relative clause, which Tacitus drops but Dio retains (62.13.5), maintains the link while the Tacitean *ventrem feri* retains the imperative language of the Senecan original, "hunc, dextra, hunc pete uterum capacem." (*Oed.*1038-9) That these quotes contain different elements of the Senecan original is more of a reflection on style rather than on content, and the recurrence of grammatical elements from Seneca suggests that Tacitus and *Octavia* are referring to more than a mere rhetorical trope in their characterizations of Agrippina's death.

To further expound upon the correspondence between *Octavia* and Tacitus, *Octavia* uses the attempted murder of Agrippina by shipwreck as a foreshadowing of Octavia's exile at the end of the play, (*Oct.* 907-910) creating an almost paradoxical link between the two where Octavia both blames Agrippina for her fate and identifies with the same woman[38]. This paradoxical link between Octavia and Agrippina also finds its way into Tacitus when he closes book XIV, the book opened by Agrippina's murder, with the divorce, exile, and death of Octavia. Following the divorce, Tacitus records that Nero briefly re-establishes Octavia as his wife following popular uproar, but this action only encourages the formation of a mob which tears down statues of Poppaea and must be driven away, "cum emissi militum globi verberibus et intento ferro turbatos disiecere" (*Ann.* 14.61, while the crowds were dispersed by the blows of the soldiers, they even scattered the bewildered demonstrators with swords drawn). This telling of events resembles the gathering of the people at Agrippina's villa following her survival of the shipwreck. This gathering also found itself dispersed by an armed gang sent by the emperor, "donec aspectu armati et minitantis agminis disiecti sunt" (*Ann.* 14.8, until they were scattered by the sight and

[38] This association between Octavia and Agrippina will be discussed at greater length in the chapter on Agrippina as *Saeva Noverca*.

threats of the armed cohort). Tacitus here creates the impression that both women exerted enough clout with the public that they attracted spontaneous crowds when they foiled the despotic plans of Nero.

In both of these instances as well, Tacitus portrays Nero as relying on the same man to deal with his problem: the mercenary Anicetus. For Agrippina, Anicetus deals the death blow (*Ann.* 14.8), but for Octavia his role shifts. Tacitus has Nero recall the service of Anicetus in asking his new favor, one which Tacitus says made him a *persona non grata*, but now he needs only to falsely accuse Octavia and live out his days in comfortable exile (*Ann.* 14.62). The final link between Octavia and Agrippina in Tacitus comes as the girl pleads to not be executed. Tacitus here records that "postremo Agrippinae nomen cieret, qua incolumi infelix quidem matrimonium sed sine exitio pertulisset" (*Ann.* 14.64, finally she called upon the name of Agrippina, from whom while alive she had suffered an unhappy marriage at least without death). Here he most closely mimics the aforementioned ambivalence of *Octavia* toward Agrippina by establishing her as the foundation of Octavia's troubles while at the same time claiming Octavia's well-being was better served while Agrippina lived. It is quite plausible to infer from this linking of Agrippina and Octavia in both works that Tacitus, presumably writing after the play was published, borrowed this outlook from the play. This serves to only further validate the point that Tacitus would not have been opposed to allowing contemporary drama to influence what he wrote about a certain period.

In regard to the earlier objection of Nisbet, he focuses solely on Tacitus' final quotation of Agrippina, causing him to fail to recognize the subtle but distinct word-play which Tacitus employs in the death scene. Boyle draws a stronger connection between Seneca and Tacitus than a quick glance at the text would suggest. Just before Agrippina's

coup de grâce is dealt, Tacitus describes her final actions and words, "iam in mortem centurioni ferrum destringenti protendens uterum 'uentrem feri' exclamauit" (*Ann.* 14.8, now upon her death, she shouted "strike my womb" while extending her abdomen to her assailant drawing his sword). Boyle comments about this passage that:

> Tacitus indeed seems to combine quite specifically both *Oedipus* and *Phoenissae* in his narrative, and draws attention to the theatrical quality of Agrippina's death not only by such allusion but by inverting natural speech. Agrippina does not thrust forward her belly and say strike the womb; she does the opposite[39].

Boyle here implies that Tacitus took Seneca's language from *Oedipus* as well as from another play of his concerning the Theban royal family, *Phoenissae*, and inverted it in order to provide a hint that this language is borrowed but also to refrain from a direct quote so that the account would not lose its historical credibility.

Phoenissae presents an intriguing but ultimately problematic aspect to the Jocasta/Agrippina death quote. It must be asked whether or not readers should infer any significance from the fact that Seneca chose to write a nearly exact quote spoken by the same character in two different plays. Like the rest of his tragic corpus, it is not known precisely when Seneca composed his *Phoenissae*, but there are multiple reasons to believe that it was his final tragedy. Uniquely among the tragedies, *Phoenissae* lacks a chorus. Whether this was intentional or not is uncertain, but in addition to its unresolved ending, this lack of a chorus indicates that the play was never finished[40]. Even beyond these

[39] Boyle (1997) 102.

[40] Marica Frank discusses these issues at length in the introduction to *Seneca's Phoenissae* (New York: Brill, 1995), 1-16.

reasons, though, Fitch's' methodology of looking at vowel shortening and internal pause also indicates that the *Phoenissae* was written at a later date than most, if not all, of the other tragedies[41]. These factors all align to indicate a later date for *Phoenissae*, leaving aside the question of what Seneca hoped to communicate by having Jocasta repeat herself. Unlike *Oedipus*, the later play does not place this quotation before the death of Jocasta, but instead locates it early in a speech of hers meant to dissuade her sons from waging war on one another (*Phoen.* 443-477).

Frank points out a striking rhetorical phenomenon in *Phoenissae*. Throughout the entire play, not one character refers to another directly by name, and even in indirect references, a proper name is only used once. What replaces these proper nouns are family terms which are meant to "stress the genetic chaos which reigns in the Theban royal house."[42] This genetic chaos resembles the chaotic family relationships of the Claudian and Neronian *domus*. Similarly too, both the Theban and Roman royal families exhibit deadly power struggles against one another. Fratricide is a major theme in *Phoenissae*. It receives significant attention in the first half, and its shadow looms over the entire second half[43]. The incomplete nature of this play leads to the consideration that Seneca may have been writing this tragedy near the time of his death. Following his "retirement" in 62CE, Seneca would have had leisure to engage in writing but also a motive to write political tragedy. Seneca's estrangement from Nero, which resulted in his asking to retire (a request, while denied by Nero, that Seneca more or less carried out anyway) and his ordered suicide a mere three years later indicate that his loyalty to the emperor had reached its limit. Furthermore, the theme of fratricide in the play involved fresh allusions to the recent

[41] Nisbet 101.
[42] Frank (1995b) 126.
[43] It should be noted that fraternal strife also is central to Seneca's *Thyestes*, which is grouped with *Phoenissae* as later in composition by Fitch.

executions by Nero of his step-sisters Octavia and Antonia, his cousins Plautus and Sulla, and years earlier the murders of his adopted brother Britannicus and his mother. The circumstances of these earliest murders relate quite strongly to the actions depicted in *Phoenissae*, especially the second half.

The rivalry between Nero and Britannicus came to a head following the death of Claudius. As Tacitus relates it, despite doing everything in her power to secure the succession of Nero, mere months after his ascension, Agrippina developed public grievances with her son and threatened to champion his stepbrother. The details of this strife *intra domo* are discussed at length in both of the following chapters, with the basic outline being that once Nero came to power, he and Seneca (as implied by Tacitus) worked to diminish the influence of Agrippina. She in turn threatened to rally the Roman garrisons in support of Britannicus. The unfortunate youth did not long survive after this. This account of events is striking when compared to the second half of *Phoenissae*. The third act (363-442) begins with Jocasta overlooking the Theban battlefield[44] where her sons are about to do battle for the rule of Thebes. She goes down to prevent them from fighting, and in the beginning of act four (443-664) she mirrors her death quote in *Oedipus* in an attempt to convince her sons to lay down their arms. As far as the surviving text extends, she manages to at least postpone the fighting, though Frank believes the missing fifth act would include a battle and the deaths of the brothers and Jocasta[45].

How then does this narrative reflect the circumstances surrounding the conflict in the royal house at the beginning of Nero's reign? It in fact represents a direct inverse. Jocasta attempts to convince Polyneices to disband his army and allow Eteocles to rule

[44] Frank (1995) ad 363-442.
[45] Frank (1995) 12.

Thebes despite the latter's breach of their agreement to rule in alternating years following the abdication of Oedipus. Agrippina threatens to bring Britannicus to the camps of the soldiers who still harbor loyalty to her late father in a challenge to her son, whom she effectively placed on the throne to the detriment of her new ward. Additionally, at the beginning of act three, Seneca has Jocasta give a brief soliloquy in which she favorably compares the infanticidal position of Agave to her own (361-76). Her preference for sons dead (by her own hand if the parallel with Agave is totally extended) rather than fighting in a conflict in which she cannot pick sides, also mirrors Agrippina's situation when she must present a defense against accusations of conspiring to have Plautus overthrow Nero. She argues that her accusers (a childless former friend of hers and her inimical former sister-in-law Domitia) have no knowledge of a mother's love, which prevents her from wishing to harm her son (*Ann*. 13.21). The contrast here becomes clearer with one mother acting in the best interests of her sons but betraying a secret desire to have prevented the current conflict through their deaths. The other woman is described as actively stoking the rivalry between her son and stepson while later professing to have never harbored any ill-intention to Nero.

The claim that Agrippina did actually seek Nero's life in order to restore her position of power returns after her murder when Seneca and Nero write to the Senate that she died after her "plot" to murder Nero had been uncovered (*Ann.* 14.11). This argument put forward by Seneca and Nero becomes central in the chapter on Agrippina as *dux femina* and will be described in further detail there. The passage on Agave in *Phoenissae* appears to be a further manifestation of this as it suggests the inner deceit of the imperial mother despite her claims to the contrary. Tacitus picks up on this characterization of Agrippina when he notes that Nero's friends, "metuebant orabantque cavere insidias mulieris semper

atrocis, tum et falsae," (*Ann.* 13.12, feared and warned him to beware the snares of a woman who was always savage and now deceptive). In a more sympathetic vein, the author of *Octavia* also appears to echo the words of Jocasta in the speech by Agrippina's ghost. After pledging vengeance on her son, she laments what could have been, saying, "utinam, antequam te parvulum in lucem edidi/aluique, saevae nostra lacerassent ferae/viscera. sine ullo scelere, sine sensu innocens/ meus occidisses," (636-9, If only wild beasts had ripped out our innards before I bore your little body into the light and nourished you. You would have died as my own, innocent without any crime or feeling). While Agrippina here does not wish to have killed Nero by her own hand, her wish that he had died before bringing shame upon her and their family parallels the words of Jocasta in *Phoenissae* and indicates that the play may have influenced her characterization. The Jocasta of *Phoenissae* then becomes the point of convergence of Seneca's dark associations for Agrippina. She retains the incestuous element from Oedipus, and the death wish for her sons reveals a hidden animosity toward them which is masked by the concern for her family which she argues on the battlefield.

The major change of perspective in this play then has little to do with Agrippina but more with Nero. In Oedipus, the guilty son is made a victim of fate and ignorance, a position which Champlin argues Nero himself used to rehabilitate his image on stage following the accusations of incest with his mother[46]. In *Phoenissae*, however, the guilty son, Eteocles, has not committed a crime out of ignorance. He has knowingly stolen the throne from his brother and assumes the position of an archetypal tyrant, closing what remains of the play with the *sententia*, "imperia pretio quolibet constant bene," (664, Power is well sought at any price). This play then represents Seneca's cynical view of the Neronian

[46] Edward Champlin, "Nero Reconsidered," *New England Review* 19.2 (1998), 101-2.

court following his retirement. Considering this view of the play, there is another literary-historical allegory which is enticing if not far-reaching. In the first half of the play, the action surrounds the now blind Oedipus who has left Thebes for the wilds of Mount Cithaeron. He laments that he has begotten two sons more evil than himself whom he hopes will destroy one another and their mother (350-62). Could this not possibly reflect the position of Seneca himself? He had after all effectively left the court voluntarily with his ability to rein in the passions of Nero severely weakened. Similarly to Jocasta and Oedipus, Seneca could rightly have seen himself at least initially partnered with Agrippina to bring Nero to power, putting him in the position of having engendered an evil tyrant. Though this cannot be argued with any certainty, the proposal is one which corresponds to the complex circumstances of the Neronian *domus*.

In conclusion for this chapter, Agrippina faced accusations of incest at every stage of her adult life. Based on the historical sources as they survive, the details of said charges are disputed, and clues within the historical texts indicate that their claims are often based upon rumors and associations. As has been shown as well, Tacitus, one of the most detailed historical sources for this period of time, seems inclined to take associations established from contemporary drama and integrate them into his own work. The evolution of the Jocasta/Agrippina death quote demonstrates clearly that Seneca's *Oedipus* and his *Phoenissae* left an impression upon how both *Octavia* and Tacitus portrayed the death of Agrippina. This association of Jocasta and Agrippina could have only encouraged accusations of incest against the latter. The chronology of composition, while still uncertain because of a lack of absolute dates, indicates that most certainly by the time he wrote *Phoenissae* and probably by the time he wrote *Oedipus* Seneca had decided to map the dark

and chaotic world of Nero's Rome onto an already archetypal example of family discord and tragedy.

Chapter Two: Agrippina as *Dux Femina*

The *topos* of the *Dux Femina* was a rhetorical device which Tacitus and other Roman authors used to malign women whom they perceived as entering the male sphere of military and political affairs[47]. This term is significant for the study of Agrippina the Younger because, even though Tacitus does not directly refer to Agrippina as *Dux Femina* in the *Annales*, his characterization of her actions as the wife of Claudius and mother of Nero is similar to that of other women whom he describes as such[48]. In particular, Judith Ginsburg draws attention to the language Tacitus employs when he describes Agrippina receiving honor from the defeated Briton Caratacus as parallel to that which he used to describe Plancina, the wife of a Roman governor of Syria during the reign of Tiberius[49]. In describing the actions of both women, he says in reference to Agrippina that, "novum sane et moribus veterum insolitum, feminam signis Romanis praesidere," (*Ann.* 12.37.15-17, It was an innovation, certainly, and one without precedent in ancient custom – that a woman should sit in state before Roman standards[50].). For Plancina, however, Tacitus' usage of "praesedisse feminam" (*Ann.* 3.33.13) refers more directly to her conducting of military training exercises with her husband. Tacitus' replication of his language in these two passages signals an association between the actions of Agrippina and Plancina which transforms Agrippina sitting as the wife of the emperor at a state ceremony into a crime of gender transgression.

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[47] Ginsburg gives a brief overview of authors who use the term (112-3), including Seneca in his *Phaedra*.
[48] See Keegan for a comparative view of Tacitus and Dio on Cartimandua, Boudica, Messalina, and Agrippina, "Boudica, Cartimandua, Messalina, and Agrippina the Younger: Independent Women of Power and the Gendered Rhetoric of Roman History," *Ancient History* 34.2 (2004): 99-148.
[49] Ginsburg 114.
[50] Translation by Ginsburg 114.

Tacitus further uses language which confuses the gender perception of Agrippina at other points in the text to create a negative depiction of her usurpation of masculine prerogatives. One of her earlier acts involves the elimination of a former rival for marriage to Claudius, Lollia Paulina. Tacitus describes Agrippina as “atrox odii … ac Lolliae infesta” (*Ann*. 12.22.1-2, fierce in anger and hostile to Lollia). Ginsburg explains this usage of *atrox*: “Seemingly inappropriate when applied to Agrippina, it underlines the way in which she has transferred the fierceness necessary for success on the battlefield to the political arena in her pursuit of what are regarded as exclusively masculine goals[51].” This usage of *atrox* by Tacitus corresponds well with what he said earlier of Agrippina after her marriage to Claudius. Tacitus makes a dual point to express both Agrippina’s influence over certain Senatorial men in addition to Claudius and her difference in motivation from her predecessor Messalina. He claims that “versa ex eo civitas et cuncta feminae oboediebant …” (*Ann.* 12.7.9-10, The state was turned over from him (Claudius) and all things yielded to a woman …). This statement comes in the midst of the new couples nuptials, indicating that from the beginning Agrippina entertained machinations for supreme power. He then immediately goes on to qualify Agrippina’s motivations:

> … non per lasciviam, ut Messalina, rebus Romanis inludenti. adductum et quasi virile servitium: palam severitas ac saepius superbia; nihil domi impudicum, nisi dominationi expediret. cupido auri immensa obtentum habebat, quasi subsidium regno pararetur. (*Ann.* 12.7.10-15)
>
> (… not through licentiousness, as with Messalina while she was abusing public affairs. A nearly manlike imposition of servitude was introduced: open severity and even more often haughtiness. There was nothing shameful at

[51] Ginsburg 115.

home, except what was useful toward total control. A great desire for gold had a pretext, as if the resources for rule were being prepared.)

This description of Agrippina at the onset of her tenure as consort of the Roman emperor anticipates her actions to come. More importantly, Tacitus employs certain vocabulary to color the perception of his audience toward Agrippina. Though he begins by claiming the state was subject to a woman, he quickly separates her from his most recent example of a wanton woman in control of the reins of power. By claiming that she acted "not through licentiousness" and that her avarice contributed to her designs for monarchial control, Tacitus ensures that his audience understands that Agrippina conducted herself in a highly disciplined fashion. Additionally, her *severitas* and *superbia* respectively represent characteristics held by soldiers and kings. Tacitus creates the impression here that this is no simple girl driven by her passions, but instead a calculating and ruthless force to be reckoned with. The combination of all of these traits allows her to impose her "nearly manlike imposition of servitude" upon not just her own household but upon the entirety of the Roman state.

After taking into consideration Tacitus' depiction of Agrippina as a force wholly different from Messalina in the imperial household, it is essential to remark that this view is not unanimously expressed by the historians writing about this period. Quite the contrary, the epitome of the sixty-first book of Dio's *Roman History* expresses the opposite point of view, that "καὶ ἡ μὲν ταχὺ καὶ αὐτὴ Μεσσαλῖνα ἐγένετο" (Dio 61.33.2.1, She (Agrippina) swiftly even became another Messalina)[52]. Dio sees no difference between these two women vying for control of their shared husband to suit their own purposes. This divergence in characterization of Agrippina is problematic because her more individualized

[52] Suetonius is of less value here than the other two authors because his account focuses on Claudius and then Nero more than on the total history of the era. He therefore talks little about Agrippina compared to the others and makes almost no mention of her motivations and aims for power.

personality renders her a more easily recognized figure if, as this work proposes, Seneca truly did seek to mythologize her in his tragedies. It should be noted, then, that while Dio asserts continuity among the wickedness of the wives of Claudius, there are indications within his text that Agrippina and Messalina did not in fact act so similarly. A striking difference between the two comes in their handling of money. As already mentioned above, Tacitus holds that Agrippina indeed coveted wealth, but he claims that it served Agrippina's pursuit of power more than anything. Dio similarly conveys that Agrippina had a certain sense of financial prudence. At 61.32.3, following her marriage to Claudius, she undertakes acquiring "πλοῦτόν τε ἀμύθητον" (unspeakable wealth) for Nero's sake, yet once Nero was ruling, she ordered 10,000,000 sesterces piled together in a room to illustrate to him his excessive spending (Dio 61b.5.4).

This attempt at deterring her son's lavish spending stands in contrast to how Dio describes the fateful wedding of Messalina and Silius. He does not give exact figures of the cost, but he does say that the wedding was "πολυτελῶς" (very costly) and that she gave him an "οἰκίαν … βασιλικὴν" (royal palace) in which she put many of Claudius' own most valuable possessions (Dio 61.31.3). When placed side by side, the contrast between the two women becomes quite clear. Agrippina chastises her son for his spending early in his reign as emperor, while Messalina spends lavishly attempting to create either a second emperor or one to supplant the first. Messalina's expensive wedding also plays into her domination by her own passions. At the onset of her wedding, Dio states that not only did she "καὶ ἐμοιχεύετο καὶ ἐπορνεύετο ῾τά τε γὰρ ἄλλα αἰσχρῶς ἔπραττε" (61.31.1) (commit adultery, prostitute herself, and do other shameful things), but she also "ἐπεθύμησε καὶ ἄνδρας τοῦτο δὴ τὸ τοῦ λόγου, πολλοὺς ἔχειν," (61.31.1-2) (set her mind toward having many husbands in the proper sense of the term.). In contrast with Tacitus, who implies an affair between

Agrippina and Pallas (*Ann.* 12.25), Dio mentions no extramarital affairs of hers while Claudius is still alive, and even after the emperor's death he only mentions that Seneca was accused of an affair with Agrippina (61b.10.1). Dio then takes this accusation as an opportunity to assail faults he perceives in Seneca's character. Coupled with his obvious animosity toward Agrippina and his admission that the charges went nowhere (61b.10.6), it is reasonable to make little of this single accusation.

Now that the historiographical depiction of Agrippina as a *Dux Femina* has been surveyed, the true task of this portion of the work still lies ahead. The ferocity and ruthlessness ascribed to Agrippina by both historical authors have as their precursors other Roman women such as Livia[53], Messalina, and Plancina, as already mentioned. Unlike these others, however, Agrippina's ferocity and power during her life continue to hold sway over the unfolding of Tacitus and Dio's historical accounts and even Suetonius' biographical account of Nero after her death. All three mention certain supernatural portents occurring following her death (*Ann.* 14.12.2) (Dio 62.16.5), including Nero learning of the Gallic uprising on Agrippina's birthday (*Nero* 40.4). Such metaphysical occurrences help to further color Agrippina as a figure larger than life, and they thus separate her from the generic depiction of wicked imperial women. Considering the wide range of prominent figures during the Julio-Claudian period who wielded great power and lost their lives at its decline, why should Agrippina have occupied such a distinct place in the imagination of the Roman historiographers? Here the greater argument of this work comes into play for this specific coloring of Agrippina's personality. As stated in the introduction to this work, following the

[53] With specific reference to Livia, I concur with Ginsburg (n. 31, 114) that Agrippina better represents the motif of the *Dux Femina* since Livia never directly sought power for herself nor was she depicted as transgressing gender roles. By the same reasoning, Agrippina also fits this mold better than Messalina, for whom the focus of the authors is more her sexual depravity than her lust for power. Barrett supports this notion when he claims that, "She (Agrippina) … would have had sufficient insight to appreciate that Messalina lacked the proper temperament to build up her position gradually and systematically." (81)

death of Agrippina, Seneca wrote the letter to the Senate justifying Nero's actions. Tacitus however writes that Seneca's letter served more as a confession on Nero's part than any sort of justification which led to public disapproval for both men (*Ann.* 14.11). Dio and Suetonius corroborate this report by making mention of derogatory graffiti written against Nero around Rome concerning his matricide (Dio 62.16.2; *Nero* 39.2).

In light of this negative public perception, it is reasonable to assert that Nero and Seneca would have felt the need to take steps to alleviate the scandal felt at his matricide. Edward Champlin puts forward a convincing argument that, in regard to many of the crimes of his reign, Nero took to the stage as various mythological figures in order to provide a context and justification for his actions[54]. He specifically notes that, by taking the role of Orestes on the stage, Nero sought to legitimize his matricide as justified[55]. Nero's role as Orestes is also important in regard to Seneca, who wrote an *Agamemnon* play depicting Electra entrusting an infant Orestes to Strophius in order to escape Clytemnestra after her murder of Agamemnon. The fact that Orestes is not a speaking role in Seneca's play indicates that Nero was not acting directly in Seneca's work, but that does not mean that he was unaware of it. Nor does it mean that he did not choose to act in concert with Seneca's work, which lays the foundation for why the matricide of Orestes was necessary. This brings up again the debate over the performance of Seneca's tragedies. While it cannot be said that these plays were performed for the public at large, such a statement is not necessary. Even if the plays were only performed for private audiences, they could still have influence over those in Nero and Seneca's inner circle, which would have been critical for Nero to maintain his control of the state.

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[54] Champlin, Edward, "Nero Reconsidered," *New England Review* 19.2 (1998), 97-108. Suetonius is the ancient source for Nero's mythological roles (*Nero* 21.3).
[55] Champlin, 100.

There is evidence, inconclusive as it is, that Seneca's *Agamemnon* did see a broader stage. Boyle remarks that a graffito in Pompeii quoting a line from Cassandra's prophetic speech proves that the *Agamemnon* was known, though not necessarily performed[56]. This, of course, says nothing of its renown in Seneca's own life since the graffito likely did not date back so far from the destruction of Pompeii which preserved it. Nonetheless, all of this speculation does not detract from the argument that Seneca wrote *Agamemnon* as propaganda to support Nero following the matricide. To the contrary, given that Nero did perform the role of Orestes and that graffiti appeared linking the emperor with this and other mythic matricides, it seems entirely plausible that a rehabilitation of the emperor was attempted through his own chosen proxy. The fact that Orestes is a voiceless child in *Agamemnon* only reinforces the danger posed by Clytemnestra.

Since a motive has now been established, what indications within the play might suggest an association between Clytemnestra and Agrippina? From the outset of her arrival on the stage following the first choral ode, Clytemnestra establishes her hatred of her husband and her contempt for the *paelex* Cassandra. This second concern is of greater relevance to the parallels with Agrippina. As has been shown with her actions toward Lollia Paulina and toward Calpurnia, a woman whose beauty was merely commented upon by Claudius (*Ann.* 12.22.), Agrippina recognized her precarious position as *coniunx principis*, especially considering that unlike Messalina she had produced no offspring for the emperor.

She nevertheless found herself quite adept at dealing with her enemies. Her accusations against Lollia provide a striking parallel to Clytemnestra's complaints about Cassandra. Tacitus reports that Agrippina "molitur crimina et accusatorem qui obiceret Chaldaeos, magos interrogatumque Apollinis Clarii simulacrum super nuptiis imperatoris," (*Ann.* 12.22.1, set in motion accusations and an accuser who would charge that she (Lollia)

[56] Boyle, n. 23, 218.

had inquired of astrologers, magicians, and the image of Clarian Apollo concerning the wedding of the emperor.). Compare this with Clytemnestra's derogatory categorization of Cassandra, referring to her as "Phrygiae vatis" (189, a Phrygian seer). Indeed, as part of Cassandra's vision of the underworld, she does see the fate of Agamemnon and asks that her fallen relatives and compatriots be able to see its fulfillment from the underworld (754-8). During this vision, Cassandra is transformed from the unwilling prophet of Apollo to a spectator relishing the destruction of one who has destroyed her homeland and taken her captive[57]. Under the law of Agrippina's time, divining the fate of the ruler would have made Cassandra guilty of a great crime against the state, just as Lollia is found guilty.

This parallel between the two *paelices*, while powerful, should not lead to the conclusion that Seneca modeled Cassandra specifically on Lollia as he has modeled Clytemnestra on Agrippina. Similar charges of witchcraft and sorcery make their appearance again when Agrippina sets her sights on another rival. This time though the rivalry is not for the affection of a husband but rather a son. Tacitus reports that just before she sets about murdering Claudius, Agrippina first accuses Domitia Lepida, her cousin and former sister-in-law, of similar crimes as Lollia[58]. In this instance, though, she did not charge that the emperor himself was in danger, but instead named herself as the one endangered by Lepida's magical scheming. This crime has even weightier consequences now than it had before, for Lollia had only been exiled and then later forced into suicide. Lepida was sentenced to death outright (*Ann.* 12.64-5). The repeated accusation by Agrippina that her rivals were employing magic against her and the imperial house makes

[57] Cedric Littlewood argues that this transformation occurs between this vision and her second speech following the murder of Agamemnon, *Self-representation and Illusion in Senecan Tragedy*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004: 219-20. Cassandra's request that the other Trojans witness Agamemnon's murder signifies however that she is already an active spectator.
[58] Following the exile of Agrippina under her brother Gaius and the death of Nero's father Domitius, Lepida took Nero into her house until Agrippina was recalled by Claudius (Nero 6.3).

telling Seneca's choice to augment the role of Cassandra in his play[59]. Rather than represent any specific rival, Cassandra can serve more vaguely as a generic female rival. Despite this, her detailed visions and her delivery of the final, foreshadowing line of the play to Clytemnestra about her fate to come solidifies the contention that Clytemnestra is meant to parallel Agrippina. This final line in particular carries the emphatic force necessary to indict Agrippina of her crimes and to exonerate Nero from his matricide.

Another damning association which Seneca creates between Agrippina and Clytemnestra is the harm which the two women pose to their own children. As has already been stated, Seneca includes a scene involving Electra sending the child Orestes away from the clutches of their mother. Tarrant attributes the earliest indication of such a scene in an *Agamemnon* play to Ion of Chios, writing during the fifth century BCE, but he doubts that this play, or any Greek play for that matter, directly influenced Seneca's writing of *Agamemnon*[60]. His further doubts that Republican tragedy directly influenced Seneca, and his inability to point to any works concerning Agamemnon produced during the Augustan era[61] make it unlikely that Seneca was merely appropriating the work of an earlier author. Instead, it appears that Seneca purposefully introduced this scene in order to denigrate Agrippina through associating her with a regicidal and infanticidal figure of myth. Seneca even goes so far as to create an irony in the play by having Clytemnestra first cite her children as her largest source of concern in regard to Cassandra arriving as a *paelex* (194-6, 198-9). This irony is most apparent when she speaks of Orestes, calling him "patrique

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[59] Tarrant argues that the inelegant transitions seen in the final act of *Agamemnon* demonstrate that Seneca was using an earlier Roman version of the play as the model for the Electra scene, but that the Cassandra portion was his own addition; *Agamemnon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976): 18.
[60] Tarrant 8-11.
[61] Tarrant 11-14.

Orestes similis" (and Orestes similar to his father), because it foreshadows that, just as she desires to destroy his father, so too will she desire to destroy him[62].

When Clytemnestra does return to the stage following the murder of Agamemnon, her assault against Electra confirms the girl's fears. Clytemnestra begins by calling Electra "hostis parentis" (953, enemy of your parent), and after a brief dialogue in which Electra reveals her defiance, Clytemnestra claims "indomita posthac virginis verba impiae/regina frangam" (964-5, As queen, I shall after this break the untamed words of an impious girl) just before she asks her about the whereabouts of Orestes. Her menacing words here can only indicate sinister intentions for her son, and her reference to her position as a queen now unencumbered by a king reveals her desire for absolute power. Tacitus reports a similar scene involving Agrippina and Nero, where charges are brought that Agrippina has been plotting against Nero, and the emperor sends Burrus to interrogate her after nearly ordering her execution outright. During her impromptu trial, Tacitus quotes Agrippina, who ends her dramatic speech by appealing to her position as a mother:

> "vivere ego Britannico potiente rerum poteram? ac si Plautus aut quis alius rem publicam iudicaturus obtinuerit, desunt scilicet mihi accusatores qui non verba impatientia caritatis aliquando incauta, sed ea crimina obiciant quibus nisi a filio absolvi non possim." (*Ann.* 12.21)
>
> "Could I live with Brittanicus in control of affairs? And if Plautus or anyone else about to judge me held the state, evidently my accusers are absent who would not merely bring up the occasional impatient, unguarded words of love, but throw at me those accusations from which I could only be absolved by a son."

[62] Tarrant cites a Professor Sandbach as suggesting the line is meant to convey another irony: namely that, as Agamemnon murdered Iphigenia, so will Orestes murder Clytemnestra, 210.

These "impatient, unguarded words" of which she speaks, of course, refer to her earlier threats to champion the cause of Britannicus over Nero after the latter had already ascended to the throne. Here Tacitus has her downplay these threats, but not long before he explained that they were, in fact, a major factor in Nero's decision to murder the boy (*Ann.* 12.14-15). This situation is the inverse of what occurs in the play, but it demonstrates all the more Seneca's aim in creating such an irony. By having Clytemnestra use her children as justification to kill Agamemnon, only to become a menace to them in his absence, Seneca mimics Agrippina's hostility toward Nero. While she has a champion to support (one whom she presumably hopes will be easier for her to control), she threatens her son with a power struggle, but after his elimination and her accusation of treason, she changes her tone. The important key to understanding this inverse is that Agrippina cannot assume power for herself like Clytemnestra does. Agrippina is not a *regina*, though she may act like one, and the legal powers which validate the position of *princeps*, such as *maius imperium* and *tribunicia potestas*, could not be conferred upon a woman. Therefore, it is her weakened position which prevents her from wholesale tyranny, but from the perspective of Tacitus and Seneca it does not inhibit her from trying. Seneca's absence from the trial of Agrippina is noteworthy[63] because he shares no part in her exoneration. It can be seen, then, that even with her powers diminished, Seneca saw her as untrustworthy and threatening.

If *Agamemnon* serves the purpose of justifying Nero in his matricidal act, another of Seneca's tragedies provides the converse perspective of this action: namely that, had Nero not acted in the way he did, Agrippina would have destroyed him and alongside him the entire Roman state. This other tragedy is *Medea*. While Clytemnestra becomes a threat to her children following her murder of Agamemnon, Medea is a successful infanticide who

[63] Tacitus (*Ann.* 13.20) credits Seneca with saving Burrus from Nero's wrath, but after that he only names Burrus as coming to the aid of beleaguered Agrippina.

simultaneously brings about the destruction of the Corinthian royal family. Seneca manages to deftly create a Medea whom his audience would recognize as having certain important traits of Agrippina. During her exchange with Creon, who had referred to her as descending from the "Colchi noxium Aeetae genus" (179, hateful family of Colchian Aeetes), Medea emphasizes the literal radiance of her ancestry: "quondam nobili fulsi patre/avoque clarum Sole deduxi genus," (209-10, once I shined with my illustrious father, and I continued the brilliant line of my ancestor, the Sun.). Medea's claim here is of course meant to challenge Creon's insult, but it also serves as a veiled reference. By the time of Seneca, the sun was no longer its own deity. The god Apollo had assumed a solar identity, and the connection to Apollo had become a prominent factor in the self-imaging of Augustus (*Augustus* 29.3, 70.1). Seneca was therefore able to appropriate a standard detail in the myth of Medea and use it to create an association with Agrippina, whose great-grandfather had taken on the patronage of Apollo and had become strongly associated with him.

Near the end of the play, Medea returns the focus to her royal lineage. With her vengeance against Jason nearly complete, one son dead and the other in her clutches, she exclaims: "iam iam recepi sceptra germanum patrem … rediere regna" (982, 984; Now, now I have recovered my scepters, my brother, my father … my kingdoms return). The concept that Medea regains royal power from the death of her own offspring is intrinsically opposed to the *praxis* of monarchy. It reflects an inversion of the natural order where noble women produce noble sons to rule, and it makes the argument that a woman can only truly rule when men have been put out of the way, as demonstrated by Clytemnestra at the end of *Agamemnon*. This inversion would have horrified a Roman audience, but the historical account makes the case that it was less farfetched than it might appear. Two instances from Tacitus concerning Agrippina parallel the inversion created in *Medea*. The earlier occurs when the conquered Celtic general Caratacus gives equal honor to Claudius and

Agrippina on their separate tribunals. Tacitus remarks upon the novelty of this event and claims that "ipsa semet parti a maioribus suis imperii sociam ferebat," (*Ann.* 12.37, She (Agrippina) was conducting herself as a partner of the empire which had been brought forth by her ancestors.). According to Tacitus, Agrippina felt entitled to sit in state before the Roman standards in a way that no woman had ever done before because she descended from the golden line of Augustus.

This first taste of Agrippina's pursuit of new and ever expanding power and status only has her labeled "a partner of the empire." Another instance, which occurs later during the reign of Claudius, corresponds even more closely with the monarchical inversion of *Medea*. As Tacitus is describing Agrippina's charges of sorcery against Lepida, he makes a short but highly indicative statement about Agrippina's character. He says that the animosity between Agrippina and Lepida stemmed from their struggle over who would influence the still young and impressionable Nero. While Lepida is said to be indulgent toward the boy, Tacitus describes Agrippina as threatening and dour, "quae filio dare imperium, tolerare imperitantem nequibat," (*Ann.* 12.64, someone who could give the empire to her son, but could not tolerate him to be emperor.). Before she has even secured rule for her son, Tacitus alleges that ultimately this was not even her goal. Additionally, recalling that a mere few lines above Tacitus has revealed that Agrippina had already set in motion to do away with Claudius, she fits perfectly into the Senecan dystopia of a woman eliminating her spouse and offspring to secure power for herself. Therefore, it becomes clear that even more than Clytemnestra, Medea is a necessary component of Seneca's plan to redeem his master by creating opprobrium for the woman who had put both of them in their positions of influence in the first place.

The prestigious lineage which Seneca correlates between Agrippina and Medea was nevertheless a difficult point politically. Simply making the comparison between a mythic

princess and the Augusta would not have been enough to tie together their public images. Seneca needed to discover a method by which he recognized the lineage of Agrippina while still calling into question her identity. Cindy Benton argues[64] that Medea's foreign ancestry is more powerfully emphasized in Seneca than in Euripides[65], which serves as the basis for Corinthian hostility towards her while they show leniency and kindness to Jason[66]. This change in attitudes toward Medea's foreign Otherness must be seen as a deliberate attempt on Seneca's part. It does not fit so neatly with Agrippina however. After all, she was the consummate Roman princess, descended from both the Julian and Claudian families, each of whom traced its ancestry back to before the founding of the Republic. That Agrippina had a claim to a pure Roman lineage though does not detract from Seneca's motive in making Medea appear especially foreign. In fact, it strengthens his need for such a motive because the association between Agrippina and Medea could diminish the power of Agrippina's lineage.

Falling in line with Seneca's aim of marginalization is another aspect of Agrippina's birth which renders her more susceptible to criticism of Otherness. Despite her Roman bona fides, Agrippina was not born in Rome or even in Italy. She was born while her father was on campaign in Germany, and her mother was waiting out his campaign in the modern German city of Cologne. Her "foreign" birth would have hardly alarmed the Romans considering the circumstances[67], but her actions toward her birthplace following her rise to power certainly concerned Tacitus. Just after finishing with the account of how Agrippina

[64] Benton, "Bringing the Other to Center Stage: Seneca's Medea and the Anxieties of Roman Imperialism," *Arethusa* 36.3 (2003): 271-84.
[65] This comparison with Euripides should not imply that the Greek author is a major source for Seneca. Tarrant's assertion that Greek tragedy had little impact on Seneca was not restricted solely to *Agamemnon*, 8-11.
[66] Benton, n.7.
[67] Although, Seneca mockingly refers to Claudius as a Gaul in the *Apocolocyntosis* because of his birthplace. The implications of this mocking will be explored in the chapter on Agrippina as *saeva noverca*.

marginalized Britannicus while elevating Nero through his adoption by Claudius, Tacitus describes how she had the town of Ara Ubiorum where she had been born made into a *colonia* (*Ann.* 12.27). The juxtaposition here is critical because it emphasizes how Agrippina diminished the standing of the legitimate scion of the *princeps* while seemingly concurrently elevating a group of barbarians to Roman citizenship[68]. Tacitus directly claims that Agrippina elevated the status of the town "quo vim suam sociis quoque nationibus ostentaret" (so that she would demonstrate her power for her allies and for the nations). Tacitus implies here that Agrippina's shared connection with the Ubian people as *socii* who then took her name and her extending to them Roman citizenship was a mask to cover her own barbarism. The line of reasoning fits well and possibly stems from Seneca's marginalization of Agrippina through the Medea proxy. Although the establishment of such *coloniae* was not an uncommon practice of the Claudian principate[69], Agrippina's direct connection to the Ubii served as an opening for personal attack. For this reason, Seneca found it necessary to further emphasize the barbaric and Other qualities of Medea.

Seneca does not cease with Agrippina's foreign birth in his attempt to marginalize her through her association with the Other. Her gender and the appropriate roles associated with gender in ancient Rome also play into his portrayal of Agrippina as not entirely Roman through the *persona* of Medea. As has already been noted, Tacitus employs masculine vocabulary when referring to Agrippina in order to emphasize her conformity to the stereotype of the *Dux Femina*. Seneca, too, characterizes Medea with masculine terms which are not only uncharacteristic of women but which Tacitus appears to mirror in his

[68] Barrett at 115 argues that the elevation of the town would have at least granted the original inhabitants Latin rights, but he also states that full citizenship would not have been out of the question. He also points to the inscriptions showing that after the change the Ubians referred to themselves as *Agrippinenses* into the Flavian era, n.66.
[69] Barrett 114.

accounts of Agrippina. The word *ferox*[70] appears six times in *Medea*, and in four of those instances the word either refers to Medea herself or to some aspect of her such as her *animus* (186, 442, 854, 917). In the other two instances, one has Medea talking about the bull at Colchis which she helped Jason to slay. This, then, also does more to characterize her than the bull because it demonstrates her power over other things considered *ferox*. The only time the word is mentioned in reference to another character is when Medea scathingly references Jason, saying: "adire certe et coniugem extremo alloqui sermone potuit— hoc quoque extimuit ferox," (418-9, Certainly he can approach his wife and have one last conversation – the fierce warrior fears this too). Medea's taunting here calls into question Jason's masculinity, and the sardonic usage of *ferox* contrasts with the multiple times that the word is used of Medea. This creates a gender inversion where husband and wife assume each other's roles.

Littleton makes a similar point, but he emphasizes that, by targeting her and Jason's children as a way to harm their father, she relegates Jason to the domestic sphere:

> In both *Troades* and *Medea* a clear contrast is drawn between the domestic world of the victims and the political power of their tormentors. Not only do Ulysses and Medea (more of a man than Jason) both exploit their victims' attachment to their children, but they stage and observe the pain which comes from this vulnerability[71].

Medea's actions thus equal her description as *ferox*. Her final taunt to Jason, "coniugem agnoscis tuam?" (1021) (Do you recognize your wife?), signifies her complete transformation

[70] Like *atrox* already mentioned, *ferox* is a word typically reserved for the masculine realm of soldiers and warfare or in descriptions of wild beasts. Using it to describe a woman indicates something wholly unfeminine about her according to Roman standards. Tacitus does not use the adjective *ferox* to describe Agrippina; however, he does specify the noun *ferocia* as a quality held by Agrippina the Younger (*Ann*. 13.2, 13.21) and by her mother Agrippina the Elder (*Ann*. 2.72).
[71] Littlewood 12.

from mother and wife into the figure of myth which she is now recognized to be. Agrippina similarly challenges her son and threatens to stage an encounter which would serve to emasculate and delegitimize him in her attempt to champion Britannicus. She emphasizes her influence with soldiers which she has maintained from their memory of her father Germanicus: "ituram cum illo in castra; audiretur hinc Germanici filia, inde debilis rursus Burrus et exul Seneca, trunca scilicet manu et professoria lingua generis humani regimen expostulantes," (*Ann.* 13.14, She said that she would go with him (Britannicus) into the soldiers' camps: on one side the daughter of Germanicus would be heard, and on the other the handicapped Burrus and exile Seneca, seeking the rule of the human race by a clearly mangled hand and authoritative speech.). Agrippina seeks to challenge her son on truly dangerous territory here by appealing to her popularity with the garrisons. She is also stepping wildly out of bounds for a woman, even the daughter of the most beloved Roman general of the time. Her actions here recall the military training exercises of Plancina, with which, as was shown at the beginning of this chapter, Tacitus has already associated her. Furthermore, she makes a direct assault on the *virtus*, or manly quality, of both Burrus and Seneca. Incapable of being a king herself, Agrippina attempts to establish herself as a quasi-official king-maker, and the main thrust of her argument is that she is more of a man than Nero's advisers because of her influence with the soldiers. On account of this influence and her willingness to advertise it, Seneca could see in her the danger posed by a mythic figure as terrible and frightening as Medea.

Lineage and gender are not the only traits which Seneca tailors in order to have Medea parallel Agrippina. Naturally, the Stoic philosopher resorted to employing logic and internal reasoning to attack Agrippina as well. Prerequisite to Medea's vengeance upon Jason are the sacrifices she has made for his benefit. When Jason comes to confront her after Creon has pronounced her banishment, she immediately commences her diatribe

outlining everything she has sacrificed for him. Her first complaint is her loss of her homeland, which she begins by stating: “pro te solebam fugere,” (449, For your sake I have grown used to fleeing.). Now, though, she complains of a dearth of places to which she can go and be welcome. Benton comments that the removal from the plot of Aegeus, the Athenian king of Athens with whom she finds refuge in Euripides, augments the complete isolation through which Seneca increases the emphasis upon her Otherness[72]. Medea then proceeds to outline the crimes she has committed for Jason, whom she calls “ingratum caput” (465, lit. ungrateful head), which have resulted in her unwelcome status in so many places (466-82). Following her litany, Jason has Medea spell out the implication for him: “IAS: “Obicere tandem quod potes crimen mihi?”/MED: “Quodcumque feci.” IAS: “Restat hoc unum insuper,/tuis ut etiam sceleribus fiam nocens.”/MED: “Tua illa, tua sunt illa: cui prodest scelus/is fecit,” (497-501, Jason: “In the end, what crime could you charge me with?” Medea: “Whatever I have done.” Jason: “This one thing remains above all, that I am made guilty by your misdeeds.” Medea: “They are yours: the one whom a crime benefits is he who did it.”).

Two similar instances occur in *Annales* where Agrippina specifically outlines the steps she has taken for her son’s benefit. The first of these occurs during her ill-fated attempt to champion Britannicus where Tacitus has her confess to her crimes, including the poisoning of Claudius. She describes Nero as having power “quod insitus et adoptivus per iniurias matris exerceret” (*Ann.* 13.14, which an implanted and adopted son commands through the crimes of his mother). The second instance involves her legal steps taken to promote his career which she brings up during her impromptu treason trial: “meis consiliis adoptio et proconsulare ius et designatio consulatus et cetera apiscendo imperio praepararentur. aut existat qui cohortis in urbe temptatas, qui provinciarum fidem

[72] Benton 274.

labefactatam, denique servos vel libertos ad scelus corruptos arguat," (*Ann.* 13.21, By my advice the adoption, the proconsular right, the consular designation, and other things were planned ahead to gain the empire. Or, let someone stand out who accuses that I bribed the soldiers in the city, shook the faith of the provinces, and furthermore corrupted the slaves and freedmen toward crime.). In both of these cases, Agrippina credits herself with Nero's ascension to the principate either through legal or illegal methods. Tacitus' point in presenting these speeches is to show her opportunism in showcasing the illegal methods when she wishes to discredit Nero and in proving her efficacy in legal affairs while maintaining her loyalty to her son.

Tacitus continues further in 13.14 to say that she also invoked "divine" Claudius, the ghosts of two of her victims, the Silani brothers, and various other misdeeds. These invocations of shades are striking when considered alongside *Medea*. Just before she delivers her destructive concoction to Creusa, Medea makes a lengthy appeal to the infernal deities and Hecate which Costa claims "has no parallel in classical drama[73]." Additionally, as she is about to commit infanticide, Medea sees the ghost of her slain brother, and makes the death of her first child a sacrifice for him (964-71). Medea and Agrippina are both depicted as appealing to individual victims of theirs in order to bring punishment on new victims. The crux for both women is that the original victims were only victimized for the sake of these new victims, a point which is supposed to indicate the hostility of the dead for the living. The pseudo-Senecan play *Octavia* picks up this motif during the speech of Agrippina's own ghost in which she claims the ghost of Claudius expects her to provide retribution for his own death and that of Brittanicus by reaping ruin upon Nero (614-17). Seneca implants this line of reasoning into the mouth of Medea in order to emphasize her

[73] C.D.N. Costa, *Medea*, Oxford University Press: Oxford (1973): ad 787-842.

attempt to shift blame for her crimes[74], a line of reasoning which the author of *Octavia* and Tacitus then attribute to Agrippina.

Perrenoud addresses this point concerning Medea by focusing specifically on her usage of the word *crimen*, whose semantic range he maps as encompassing meanings such as accusation, crime, or even the moral responsibility for a crime[75]. This last definition is exemplified in the passage quoted from *Medea* above where Medea lays the blame for everything she has done at Jason's feet. Tacitus similarly employs *crimen* in his direct speech from Agrippina at *Ann.* 13.21 when, after listing her actions and the accusations that would arise under another emperor, she says, "sed ea crimina obiciant quibus nisi a filio absolvi non possim," (but they would charge these crimes from which I could not be absolved except by a son.). When she claims that only her son can absolve her of these hypothetical crimes, she is alluding to the fact that only he can forgive them because they are in fact his own crimes. It is the same line of logic as in *Medea*, and it renders Medea's statement that whomever a crime benefits is its author equally applicable to Nero. For Seneca then, this line of reasoning would have been important to highlight in his play and simultaneously reveal the consequences which could arise from it.

A final aspect to remark upon in regard to Seneca's two female antagonists and their relationship to the later characterization of Agrippina is the association which all three share with the goddesses of vengeance, the Furies. These goddesses are known to inflict justice upon those having harmed their relatives, as in the *Eumenides*, by Aeschylus or to cause general mischief, as in Virgil's *Aeneid* book seven. In the first sense, Clytemnestra is the original example from the Aeschylean trilogy the *Oresteia*. Seneca, even if Aeschylus is not his main influence, as Tarrant maintains, highlights this aspect of Clytemnestra's

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[74] André Perrenoud, "À propos de l'expression « redde crimen » (Sen. Med., 246)," *Latomus* (1963): 490.
[75] Perrenoud 491.

tradition. In her dialogue with the Nurse, she describes herself as losing her grip on reality as the thought of a “maius nefas” (*Ag.* 124, greater crime) than that of her sister consumes her mind. To the advice of the nurse she responds: “et inter istas mentis obsessae faces/fessus quidem et devictus et pessumdatus pudor rebellat,” (137-8, Shame now exhausted, overcome, and destroyed struggles among these torches of a fixated mind.). These torches which occupy the mind of Clytemnestra represent the Furies possessing her mind for the vengeance of her daughter, as she reveals only a few lines later[76]. The Nurse, in clueless fashion, tells Clytemnestra to remember her children by Agamemnon in order to put aside her hatred for him, to which Clytemnestra replies; “equidem et iugales filiae memini faces” (158, Indeed I recall the wedding torches of our daughter). Clytemnestra’s immediate recollection of her daughter’s staged wedding torches further carries the connotation of the vengeful Furies.

This conflation of the vengeful torches of the Furies and the wedding torch is common to Clytemnestra, Medea, and Agrippina. *Medea* opens with the motif as she begins by invoking the “di coniugales” (1, Gods of marriage) at the beginning of her speech and then invoking the “ultrices deae … atram cruentis manibus amplexae facem,” (13-15, goddesses of vengeance … grasping a black torch in their bloody hands). Medea asks that the Furies be present as torch bearers at the wedding of Jason and Creusa, a direct pronouncement of harm against the couple. The author of *Octavia* carries highly similar language over to Agrippina when her ghost appears on the wedding night of Nero and Poppaea proclaiming: “Tellure rupta Tartaro gressum extuli,/Stygiam cruenta praeferens dextra facem/thalamis scelestis. nubat his flammis meo Poppaea nato iuncta, quas manus/dolorque matris vertet ad tristes rogos,” (593-7, While the earth has been opened, I

[76] Boyle, *Octavia*, ad 594-5 states that torches were a typical accessory when staging the Furies in theater.

step out from Tartarus carrying a Stygian torch in my bloody right hand to this wicked bedroom. Poppaea joined to my son is betrothed with these flames which the hands and grief of a mother turn into doleful pyres.). Agrippina most specifically identifies herself with the Furies by carrying the torch and promising funeral pyres for Poppaea. In each of these cases, weddings are marked with the imprimatur of tragedy to come by the presence of the Furies called down by an observer.

For both Clytemnestra and Medea, their invocation of Furies serves as a prolepsis for their eventual possession by these goddesses in order to take vengeance directly upon their enemies. In *Agamemnon*, Cassandra's vision of the underworld ends with her description of the Furies preparing the fate of Agamemnon while "fert laeva semustas faces" (761, their left hands bear half-burnt torches). Having burnt in the mind of Clytemnestra from the start of the play, the Furies torches are now "semustas" with their task nearing fruition. Likewise Medea has her own vision as she prepares to murder her children: "quem trabe infesta petit/Megaera? cuius umbra dispersis venit/incerta membris? frater est, poenas petit" (962-4, Whom does Megaera seek with a hostile beam? Whose unknown shade arrives with scattered limbs? It is my brother, he seeks punishment). Medea witnesses the approach of Absyrtus with a new comrade, Megaera, one of the three Furies. Medea shows no hesitation in offering herself to the Furies for possession (966), and with their vengeful power within her she carries out her infanticide. The apparition of Absyrtus provides Medea with a further link to both Clytemnestra and Agrippina. Although not mentioned in Seneca's own play, Clytemnestra's ghost in the *Eumenides*, a model which is impossible to ignore in light of Agrippina's ghost in *Octavia*, complains to the Furies that Agamemnon and Cassandra torment her in the Underworld (95-98). Agrippina similarly remarks that Claudius demands retribution from her for his own death and that of his son Britannicus (614-9). In both of these cases, the torment in the underworld by previous

victims causes the antagonizing women to attack new victims, and the same is true for Medea.

The imagery of the Furies constitutes a final adhesive which unites these three women in the mind of Seneca, and his portrayal of Medea and Clytemnestra exerts a direct influence on the author of *Octavia*. Returning to the descriptions by Tacitus, Dio, and Suetonius of how Agrippina haunted Nero after her death and many portents happened at the same general time, this association with the Furies created by Seneca and maintained by the author of the *Octavia* ingrained into the Roman psyche the image of Agrippina as a figure larger than life. She thus becomes the *dux femina par excellence* because her power extends beyond the bounds of the physical world. The parallels drawn between her, Clytemnestra, and Medea illustrate both how she managed to dominate her rivals and how, had her power continued unabated, she could have brought ruin upon the entirety of Rome. The necessity of *Agamemnon* and *Medea* in Seneca's campaign to rehabilitate the image of Nero is clear. A woman popular with both the soldiers and the people could not also become the martyr of a vicious son. She had to be recreated into the *atrox* figure fully equipped with *ferocia* and even supernatural power that the historical tradition has passed down to modernity.

Chapter Three: Agrippina as *Saeva Noverca*

The final segment of this work will deal with the association of Agrippina with the rhetorical and literary *topos* of the *saeva noverca* (wicked stepmother). Just as with her previous associations with the images of *incesta* and *dux femina*, the circumstances of her situation as consort of the *princeps* Claudius created the opening through which her contemporaries and later historians could affix this stereotype to her. Again, however, as with the other stereotypes, Agrippina's aggressive and wholly negative characterization in the historical writings of Tacitus and Dio appears to stem from a longer tradition which can be traced back to the negative characterization of a wicked stepmother in the tragic corpus of Seneca, the goddess Juno. Agrippina's conformity to this goddess through the prism of the *saeva noverca* is nevertheless more complicated than a simple comparison of the historical and tragic texts involved.

Another work of Seneca, the *Apocolocyntosis*[77], creates a paradigmatic shift in how the Juno of *Hercules Furens* should be interpreted in light of the events of the mid 50s CE. *Octavia*[78] contributes to this shift through its attacks on Agrippina as a *noverca* juxtaposed with the arguments of Octavia's *nutrix* that Octavia assimilate herself to Juno in her marriage to Nero. Juno's double nature as both the goddess of marriage and a *saeva noverca* and punisher of *paelices* is exploited by the author here in such a way that it creates an association between Agrippina as the hated stepmother and Octavia as her unwilling protégé. The interaction between four texts from three authors renders the

[77] There has been debate over whether Seneca actually wrote the *Apocolocyntosis*. This work follows Martha Nussbaum, who tackles the issue in her introduction to the satire in the book *Anger, Mercy, Revenge*. Trans. Robert Kaster and Martha Nussbaum. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). She declares on page 198 that, "The only argument given against recognizing Seneca as the work's author is the prejudice that a solemn philosopher could not be funny or spiteful."
[78] The pseudo-Senecan authorship and the dating of this work to the Flavian era are discussed in the introduction to this work.

argument of this chapter rather complex. The linguistic and historical evidence, however, is remarkable, and the tight cohesion of so many different players serves to strengthen the argument that Seneca used his works to attack Agrippina covertly because it so effectively influenced her portrayal in the works of later authors.

In order to adequately discuss any of this, however, first the tradition of the *saeva noverca* in imperial Rome must be established. The *saeva noverca* is a literary and rhetorical trope with an extensive tradition in Latin literature. During the early empire it held a prominent place within the Roman rhetorical practice of the *controversia* in which young boys would be given hypothetical legal situations and told to construct a compelling argument tailored to the circumstances before an imagined jury[79]. The prevalence of the *saeva noverca* in these constructed speeches is attested by multiple ancient sources[80]. Watson counts 21 stepmothers appearing in surviving Roman declamatory collections[81], and of these only two are not depicted negatively[82]. To be certain, the construct of the *saeva noverca* existed before the tradition of Roman declamation. Mythological examples of wicked stepmothers survive in Greek tragedy and folktale[83], and Watson remarks that the wicked stepmother is probably only considered a particularly Roman fascination because of the loss of numerous Greek tragedies which involved plots of such a character[84].

Watson, nevertheless, identifies three variations of action on the part of the stepmother in Roman declamation which separate her from stepmothers found in Greek mythology: disinheritance of her stepchild (always a stepson) rather than outright murder,

[79] David Noy, "Wicked Stepmothers in Roman Society and Imagination," *Journal of Family History* 16: 346.
[80] Quintilian, *Institutia Oratoria* 2.10.5; Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* 4.5, 7.1.
[81] Patricia Watson, *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny, and Reality* (New York: Brill, 1995), 93.
[82] Watson 95.
[83] Watson 1-50. She explicitly names figures such as Medea, Ino, Creusa, and Sidero as examples of murderous stepmothers, while Phaedra represents a different class of the amorous stepmother.
[84] Watson 2-3.

seeking the inheritance of her husband for herself rather than her own children, and sometimes seeking the inheritance on behalf of her daughter rather than her son[85]. Noy similarly notes that the trope of the wicked stepmother arises from "their (the Romans') obsession with property and inheritance[86]." When the rivalry between stepmother and stepson over inheritance is acknowledged, the ease of associating Agrippina with this stereotype becomes apparent.

Stepmothers also figure in Roman literature of the early empire, and certain new associations begin to take shape which have direct relevance to this work. Beginning with Virgil, Juno comes to be referred to as a *noverca* (*Aeneid* 8.288). Watson notes that Juno's characterization as a *noverca* differs from Hera in Greek literature, who is first referred to as a *metruia* by Plato[87]. Noy observes that the very etymology of *noverca* when compared with *metruia* brings with it a connotation of hostility because, rather than deriving from the word for mother, as with *metruia*, it derives from *novus*, which can mean new, strange, or foreign[88]. Thus, there are different overtones to calling Hera *metruia* and Juno *noverca*. Ovid picks up this characterization of Juno in multiple works, including *Metamorphoses*. While in Virgil mention of Juno as *noverca* is merely made in passing while talking about her most famous suffering stepchild, Hercules, Ovid applies the label to Juno in reference to others among her many stepchildren. Before Hercules arrives on the scene in book nine of *Metamorphoses*, Juno attempts to prevent the birth of Apollo and Artemis by withholding any place of birth for them. Only when Leto reaches the island of Delos can she give birth with Juno as "invita … noverca" (VI.336, an unwilling stepmother).

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[85] Watson 93.
[86] Noy 357.
[87] Watson 113.
[88] Noy 347.

Even when not directly called *noverca*, Ovid portrays Juno as flying into a rage against the prospect of stepchildren being born to her husband. After Juppiter has raped the nymph Callisto and caused her to be ostracized from the followers of Diana, Juno feels the need to add her own punishment to the already destitute girl. In describing Juno's rash decision to attack the girl ("causa morae nulla est;" 468, There was no reason to delay), Ovid draws particular attention to the fact that Arcas had been birthed, from which he claims "indoluit Juno" (469, Juno felt slighted). In this quick aside, Ovid makes a point to emphasize the birth of a stepchild as the true impetus for Juno's attack rather than the infidelity of Juppiter. This is further confirmed by the contradiction mentioned above, where he claims Juno had no cause for delay; that is, no cause aside from the nine month delay which she allowed to pass before her assault. The lack of delay then neither proceeds from the point at which Juppiter raped Callisto nor from when Diana expelled her from her circle. Instead the lack of delay refers to the birth of Arcas. Juno's transformation of Callisto into a bear, which results in her son no longer recognizing her when he comes of age, is indicative of the wicked stepmother's goal to deprive her stepchildren of their very identity by assuming their inheritance for herself or her children. In the same sense that depriving children of their inheritance leaves them essentially orphaned, so too does Juno remove Arcas' only parent, given that Juppiter appears to take no interest in the boy until he transforms him and his mother into constellations.

Though a great many more examples of Juno as *saeva noverca* can be found, what matters is that the foundation for the tradition had been established in pre-Senecan literature. Seneca then had a preconceived understanding of the *noverca* tradition for Juno, and exploits it appropriately in *Hercules Furens*. The date of composition and publication for this play is ambiguous, as with the rest of Seneca's tragedies; however, unlike the

others, a *terminus ante quem* in the year 54 CE can be established because of apparent parodying by Seneca in his *Apocolocyntosis*[89]. Fitch further suggests that the occurrence of parody indicates that *Hercules Furens* had been recently (within a year or two) presented through recitation[90] and thus probably not written any earlier than 49 CE. This date places *Hercules Furens* before Seneca's rise to prominence. He would either have still been in exile or Agrippina would only recently have had him recalled and installed as Nero's tutor. This play, then, is highly unlikely to have originally been composed with propaganda against Agrippina in mind.

Despite this, the early date of composition need not preclude the argument that Juno's depiction as *saeva noverca* influenced later conceptions of Agrippina in this role. Nor does it have to mean that Seneca did not eventually think to employ this already written play against his patroness. The *Apocolocyntosis* becomes the critical component in this bit of rhetorical and associative acrobatics. The parody of *Hercules Furens* in this work enables the establishment of the *terminus ante quem*, but the effect of the parody goes considerably further. Parody as a literary device causes the readers (or listeners) to reconsider an original text through the prism of the text employing the parody. The fact that Seneca would choose to parody one of his own plays creates the possibility that Seneca sought to create a different perception of his play than had been intended at its original composition. To understand what this new implication is, a brief examination of the *Apocolocyntosis* is necessary.

[89] Fitch is inconsistent regarding the question of whether there was an actual staging of the play, since he later claims that stage consciousness is more apparent in the madness scene of this play than in other plays of the Senecan corpus; *Seneca's Hercules Furens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 50-3.
[90] Fitch 351.

The *Apocolocyntosis* was written shortly after the death of Claudius, which occurred in October of 54 CE. A popular suggestion among scholars is that the work was written to be recited at the Saturnalia of the same year[91], which would have given it some cover for its hostility to the recently deceased emperor. The satire also contains latent suggestions that it did not merely deal with the dead emperor. To be sure, the name Agrippina does not appear even once in it, even though the names of Messalina, Julia Livilla, and other women of the imperial family are mentioned (*Apo.* 10, 11, 13). This should not be surprising, since the Saturnalia would not protect one indefinitely. Nonetheless, Richard Bauman makes the case that the work can be construed as an attack on Agrippina, most notably in her function as priestess of the Divine Claudius[92]. He points to Tacitus to demonstrate that Seneca wrote Nero's accession speech to the Senate in which the young emperor denounced many of the most detested policies of Claudius, most of which involved the entanglement of the emperor's *domus privata* with the *res publica* (*Ann.*13.3-4). Bauman claims that this disentanglement of *domus* and *res publica* was a direct attempt to extricate Agrippina from any role in the government, seeing as women had no prerogatives in the Roman constitution to participate in public life[93].

Bauman posits that, in order to combat this immediate attempt to strip her of public authority, Agrippina cited her position as priestess of the Divine Claudius to challenge two motions of the Senate which would have changed certain decrees of Claudius[94]. Tacitus describes the Senate as acquiescing to Agrippina's challenge by holding the meetings concerning these acts in the library of the Palatine palace so that she could listen to the debate behind a curtain (*Ann.* 13.5). This unprecedented step of allowing a woman to attend

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[91] Naussbaum, 197-8.
[92] Richard Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 267, n.13.
[93] Bauman 192.
[94] Bauman 192-3.

a Senate meeting speaks to the authority which Agrippina must have held, and Bauman's argument that her position as priestess of the god whose laws they sought to change accentuated that authority accounts for the magnitude of her influence. Ultimately the changes to the acts were passed despite Agrippina's presence at the Senate meeting. This fact, coupled with Seneca's early attack against the entanglement of *domus* and *res publica*, signify an early and determined effort to wrest away the power which Agrippina had obtained for herself under Claudius. Furthermore, in the same chapter which describes Agrippina's defeat in the Senate, Tacitus also mentions her attempt to sit with Nero in state when he received the Armenian legates. Once again Seneca came to the fore in opposing Agrippina by having Nero step off the platform to greet her.

These events are all said to have occurred before the end of 54. Considering that Claudius only died in October of that year, the celerity with which Seneca, Nero, and the Senate moved to dismantle his legacy and the power held by his widow is striking. All of this also serves to demonstrate why Seneca would have seen the utility of composing a satire which denigrated the divine status of Claudius. Additionally, the text of the *Apocolocyntosis* contains evidence that Agrippina was meant as an unspoken target. As Claudius is dying, Seneca depicts a dialogue between the god Mercury and the Fate Clotho. Mercury asks that Clotho end Claudius' agony by death to which she responds that she had wanted to give him long enough to grant Roman citizenship to all Greeks, Gauls, Spaniards, and Britons (*Apo.* 3). This line of criticism is reiterated after Claudius has ascended to heaven when the goddess Fever identifies Claudius to Hercules as having been born at Lyons, making him "Gallus germanus" (*Apo.* 6, a true Gaul[95]). These jokes poking

[95] This is a pun because Gallus Germanus would mean a German Gaul.

fun at Claudius' place of birth and his policy of expanding citizenship would not have gone unnoticed by Agrippina[96].

Two chapters later, as the assembly of the gods debates admitting Claudius into their ranks, one of the speakers[97] mentions that Claudius struck Junius Silanus from the Senate due to accusations of incest with his sister, Junia Silana (*Apo.* 8). The speaker then comments upon the irony of this action of Claudius by stating, "quid in cubiculo suo faciat, nescit," (he does not know what he does in his own bedroom.). Tacitus ascribes the action against Silanus to Agrippina so that Claudius would break his daughter Octavia's engagement to Silanus, freeing her to marry Nero (*Ann.* 12.3-4). By bringing up the expulsion of Silanus from the Senate, Seneca is able to attack Agrippina on two grounds: the first being that she blackened the name of a senator for her own purposes, and the second being that her action was hypocritical considering the nature of her own marriage.

A final smear against Agrippina which comes out of the *Apocolocyntosis* occurs after Claudius is condemned to the underworld. Upon arriving at the entrance to the underworld, Claudius meets his freedman Narcissus, of whom the author flippantly says that he arrived via a shortcut (*Apo.* 13). The shortcut, according to Tacitus at least, is that Agrippina forced him to commit suicide immediately following the death of Claudius (*Ann.* 13.1). These examples, which are sprinkled into the beginning, middle, and end of the satire, illustrate the deftness with which Seneca managed to lambaste both Agrippina's position as priestess of a god rejected by the gods and her own personal flaws through implications of foreignness, incest, and murder. In a way, the *Apocolocyntosis* serves as a microcosm of the tragedies in which Seneca creates the same associations for her.

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[96] See chapter two of this work for a discussion of Agrippina's own foreign birth and expansion of citizenship to the residents of her birthplace.
[97] A corruption of the text obscures the identity of the speaker.

In *Hercules Furens*, Seneca envisaged another stereotype in which to shroud Agrippina. Of the many attacks made against Claudius and Agrippina in the *Apocolocyntosis*, the charge that the two had neglected Claudius' son Britannicus does not appear. It would have been unfitting in a poem which seeks to downcast the reign of the previous emperor and thus hypothetically elevate the incoming emperor[98]. In his discussion of the stepmother in Roman rhetoric and literature, however, Noy points to Cicero, Propertius, and the elder Seneca for statements that a mother who fails in her duties is tantamount to a stepmother[99]. As has already been discussed in the chapter on the *dux femina*, Agrippina threatened to openly champion Britannicus after Nero dismissed Pallas from his position as financial secretary, placing her own interests above those of her son. While this occurred in 55, following the recitation of the *Apocolocyntosis*, by December of 54 the power struggle had already gone into full force and rumors of shifting alliances may have come even before the dismissal of Pallas[100]. By focusing attention back on *Hercules Furens* through parodying it in the *Apocolocyntosis*, Seneca may have hoped to impugn Agrippina as acting like a *noverca* toward her own son rather than toward Britannicus.

Before going further, a brief recap of what has been discussed is called for by the complexity of the preceding argument. The trope of the *saeva noverca* is present in both rhetoric and literature with Juno assuming its attributions beginning with Virgil and

[98] The Apollonian hymn in chapter 2 of the *Apocolocyntosis* is argued by Edward Champlin to be a later insertion following the onset of Nero's campaign to incorporate the god into his public persona. Champlin points out how all of the epigraphical, numismatic, and literary evidence for this campaign places it following the death of Agrippina in 59. Based on this evidence, coupled with the fact that the extraction of these lines does nothing to affect the continuity of the work, Champlin argues that they were also added at a later date: "Nero, Apollo, and the Poets," *Phoenix* 57.3/4 (2003): 276-83.
[99] Noy (348) also cites *Hercules Furens* 1015 as expressing a similar idea, but the claim seems poorly construed. Hercules does not refer to Megara as *noverca* because she fails to prevent him from killing their children, but rather because he has confused her with Juno in his madness.
[100] It should be noted that during the same Saturnalia at which the *Apocolocyntosis* was recited, Britannicus also sang during the celebrations about how he was deprived of his right to the succession (*Ann.*13.15). This point in time, then, was full of political ferment.

continuing through Ovid to Seneca. Following the death of Claudius and the ascension of Nero, a power struggle begins between Seneca and Agrippina, with Seneca appearing to take the upper hand. As Nero attempts to follow through on his promise in his first speech of the Senate to end the worst practices of Claudius' reign and to separate his household affairs from public affairs, Agrippina steps in to prevent these changes as the widow and priestess of Claudius. She succeeds in forcing the Senate to debate the matter in her veiled presence, but she ultimately loses on the actual policy decisions. As the situation deteriorates and Pallas is removed from his position as treasurer, Agrippina threatens to champion Britannicus, who has also made indications on his own that he does not intend to allow Nero to reign unchallenged, emphasized by his singing at the same Saturnalia festivities in which the *Apocolocyntosis* is presumed to have been recited.

The earliest manifestation of this struggle is Nero's ascension speech, written by Seneca. The immediate repudiation of parts of Claudius' reign, even as the Senate has just voted him divine honors, indicates that Seneca and Nero sought to rid themselves of Agrippina's influence from the start. Separating the affairs of the *domus* from those of the *res publica* should have sufficed since, as a woman, she held no power in the public realm. Her nearly successful attempt at using her position as priestess of Claudius to prevent policy changes upped the ante for Seneca. He made the bold move to attack the very grounds upon which Agrippina's only public authority rested, and he did so in the guise of a supposedly fun and unserious satire[101]. In the *Apocolocyntosis*, the unnamed figure of Agrippina stands in the background of nearly all of the attacks made against Claudius in the same way that Juno remains in the background of *Hercules Furens* as the protagonist unknowingly approaches his looming madness. The menace and hostility of Agrippina in

[101] Miriam Griffin argues for the apolitical nature of the *Apocolocyntosis*; *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 96-7.

this satire, where she is responsible for not only the death of Claudius but also many of the deaths for which he is lambasted, links her to Juno through the parody of *Hercules Furens* and likely served as a warning to both Nero and Britannicus that such a *noverca* could not be trusted by a true son or a stepson.

Now that the relationship between the *Apocolocyntosis*, Agrippina, and *Hercules Furens* has been related, the final important pillar in the foundation of the *saeva noverca* tradition must be discussed: the historical *noverca.* In this instance, the line of direct influence becomes muddled because the historical stepmother *par excellence* is Livia Drusilla, but most of the texts which survive about her date to after the Neronian period when Seneca wrote[102]. Modern scholars exhibit a healthy amount of doubt in regard to the hostile characterization of Livia as a murderous stepmother by Tacitus in particular and by Suetonius and Dio to a lesser extent. Tacitus is singled out as the most hostile of the three, due in large part to the work done by multiple scholars to parse and analyze the rhetorical devices he uses to imply guilt in certain situations where definitive proof did not exist[103]. Early in *Annales* Tacitus begins his smear campaign against Livia by indirectly imputing the deaths of two of Augustus' grandsons and the exile of the third to her influence (*Ann.* 1.3). Watson comments upon the fact that Tacitus presents the deaths of Gaius and Lucius as following that of their father Agrippa, despite the fact that the youths died two years apart and Agrippa had died over a decade before them[104]. The placement of Tacitus' accusation against Livia is also important. Because he cannot directly lay the blame for the

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[102] Velleius Paterculus is the exception here, and his work also serves as a counterexample against the relatively hostile texts of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio.
[103] Inez Scott Ryberg, "Tacitus' Art of Innuendo," *Transactions and Proceedings of the APA* 73 (1942): 383-404; Stephen Daitz, "Tacitus' Technique of Character Portrayal," *The American Journal of Philology* 81.1 (1960): 30-52; Donald Sullivan, "Innuendo and the 'Weighted Alternative' in Tacitus," *The Classical Journal* 71.4 (1976): 312-26; Olivier Devilliers, L'art de la persuasion dans les Annales de Tacite (Bruxelles: Latomus, 1994).
[104] Watson 180, n.14.

two deaths at her feet (neither youth was even at Rome when he died), Tacitus offers a probable and non-scandalous explanation for the deaths, followed immediately with his alternative implication of "novercae Liviae dolus" (*Ann.* 1.3, a scheme of their stepmother Livia). This use of the "weighted alternative" indicates which possibility Tacitus prefers to believe, even though he lacks the proof necessary to state it bluntly[105].

By attributing the deaths of Lucius and Gaius along with the exile of Agrippa Postumus to Livia, Tacitus molds her into the image of the wicked stepmother, depriving her stepchildren (in this case they are actually the children of her stepdaughter) of their inheritance, the Roman empire. Within the first five chapters of book one, Livia has successfully dealt with all of the potential male heirs to Augustus who could rival her son. Tacitus then breaks from the tradition (at least the Roman tradition[106]) by having Livia next set her sights on one of her stepdaughter's daughters. An effective technique by which Tacitus realigns this to fit into the tradition of the *saeva noverca* as established in Roman declamation is by characterizing Agrippina the Elder as transgressing the bounds of traditional female decorum. As mentioned in the *dux femina* discussion, this gender transgression by the elder Agrippina foreshadows the future portrayal of her namesake. It must be maintained, however, that both Livia's portrayal as *saeva noverca* and Agrippina's portrayal as *dux femina* are constructions created to promote an agenda. The origination of this agenda is less simple to trace. Watson postulates that Livia's association with the *saeva noverca* did not begin with Tacitus, but rather Scribonia likely began to spread the

[105] See Sullivan 314-5 for discussion of the weighted alternative.
[106] Watson 93 and Noy 350 both remark that while Greek stepmothers would often be portrayed as targeting their stepchildren of both genders, Roman stepmothers are often only put into conflict with their stepsons.

rumor and Agrippina the Younger maintained its coloring in her memoirs when describing the struggle her own mother had with Tiberius and Livia[107].

The irony of this situation becomes apparent immediately, as does the difficulty of tracing the origin of the rumors and implications surrounding prominent members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. There is little doubt, though, that Agrippina did not intend her own memoirs to form the basis of the historiographical tradition to which later authors would assimilate her. Naturally the association between Livia and Agrippina is apparent in that they are the only two imperial mothers of the Julio-Claudian era to survive into the reigns of their sons. They were also the only two to enter marriages with emperors where both parties had children from prior marriages. The conflation of the two, therefore, is highly appealing, but the scholarly skepticism towards Livia's portrayal as *saeva noverca* is less pronounced for Agrippina[108]. Whereas Tacitus describes Livia as accomplishing her stepmotherly goals by "obscuris … artibus" (*Ann.* 1.3, secret machinations), Agrippina is reported to have openly promoted the succession of her son over Britannicus through such conspicuous means as the early assumption of the *toga virilis* and his future appointment as consul. The suppression of Claudius' will no doubt did not help to dispel the association, though it must be noted that Tacitus does not believe it was suppressed because it would have favored Brittanicus but rather because it would have seemed despicable to the people for the adopted son (called here a stepson despite the adoption) to be favored over the natural son (*Ann.* 12.69).

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[107] Watson 177, n.6.

[108] Watson 184. Ginsburg (109, n. 15) argues that Watson applies harsher scrutiny to the Tacitean narrative concerning Livia than that concerning Agrippina, yet he is the major surviving source that both acted as wicked stepmothers.

Despite the success of both imperial stepmothers in securing the empire for their sons over the sons of their reigning husbands, evidence within Tacitus runs contrary to the portrait he attempts to project of two conniving women with a singular goal in mind. In both cases Tacitus undermines any potentially positive image which might result from actions which do not conform to the stepmother stereotype. In the case of Livia, Tacitus mentions that she supported Julia the Younger during her lengthy exile on Trimerum, but he makes certain that her motives in doing so are not confused: "florentis privignos cum per occultum subvertisset, misericordiam erga adflictos palam ostentabat," (*Ann.* 4.71, while they prospered she would undermine her stepchildren secretly, but she openly showed pity towards them while they suffered.). The imputation of hypocrisy is necessary here because otherwise her actions would be too contrary to the portrayal which Tacitus has created.

Strangely, Tacitus does not invoke such alternative motivation when he makes the claim that Livia in the final years of her life served as a check against the cruelty of Tiberius and Sejanus against the elder Agrippina. The only measure Tacitus takes to express any doubt over this situation is to claim that it was the people and not himself who believed this. Despite this, his vivid language in describing how Sejanus and Tiberius moved following the death of Livia is striking: "tunc velut frenis exoluti proruperunt missaeque in Agrippinam ac Neronem litterae quas pridem adlatas et cohibitas ab Augusta credidit vulgus: haud enim multum post mortem eius recitatae sunt," (*Ann.* 5.3, Then as if they had been released from the reins, the letters sent against Agrippina and Nero made haste which before the people believed had been placed aside and withheld by the Augusta: indeed they were read out almost immediately following her death.). Even with his disclaimer that it was only a belief of the people that Livia withheld these letters, his simile

and the remark about how quickly the letters followed Livia's death imply that he finds it difficult to contradict the scenario.

Agrippina, too, has situations arise in which she does not fit the stepmother trope; although considering that she is portrayed as supporting either her son against her stepson or vice versa, she never escapes the stereotype. Aside from her dealing with her son and stepson, there is a relationship which contradicts Agrippina as *saeva noverca* in Tacitus. This is the relationship between Agrippina and her stepdaughter Octavia. Tacitus makes little mention of any interaction between these two outside of Agrippina's success at arranging the marriage between Nero and Octavia. The instances where the two are mentioned together stand out because these instances are less politically charged, though not totally bereft of political implication. The death of Britannicus presents one of the few glimpses of how the two interact under the oppressive gaze of Nero's court. When the boy dies and turns a frightening shade of blue, Nero merely brushes this aside as a seizure. Tacitus makes a point to note, however, the reactions of Agrippina and Octavia:

> at Agrippinae is pavor, ea consternatio mentis, quamvis vultu premeretur, emicuit ut perinde ignaram fuisse atque Octaviam sororem Britannici constiterit: quippe sibi supremum auxilium ereptum et parricidii exemplum intellegebat. Octavia quoque, quamvis rudibus annis, dolorem caritatem, omnis adfectus abscondere didicerat. (*Ann.* 13.16)
>
> But this fear of Agrippina, this dismay of her mind, although she tried to suppress it on her face, revealed that she and Octavia, the sister of Britannicus, were ignorant of the crime. Due to this she understood that her final source of help had been torn away and that there was a model for parricide. Octavia also, even though in her early years, had learned to do away with all expression of pain, love and emotion.

The usage of *consto* here is worth remarking upon because, while it can be taken with the infinitive to simply mean that something is established or agreed upon, its literal meaning of standing together should not be simply ignored. The implication then is that Agrippina and Octavia are a unit separate from Nero. This implication later returns when Nero puts

Agrippina on trial for conspiring with Rubellius Plautus. As he is introducing the circumstances for this trial, Tacitus clarifies that the accusations against Agrippina are not the already well known charges that she wept for Britannicus or exposed Nero's mistreatment of Octavia (*Ann.* 13.19). This statement, though off-handed, reveals two things. The first is that Agrippina at this point had firmly assumed the side of her stepchildren over her own son, and the second, which is perhaps the more remarkable of the two, is that once Britannicus had been removed, Nero did not seem to care how well known the first point was.

Just as with Livia, Tacitus couches Agrippina's actions toward her stepchildren in her political motivations. The characterization of Agrippina up until this point leaves no room for believing her capable of an association with another person that is not tied to her political ambitions, and he therefore feels little need to explain why she should champion Britannicus and Octavia as she does. The question must be asked, though, what political benefit a teenage girl like Octavia could have provided for Agrippina. Clearly Nero saw no danger in such an alliance because otherwise he would not have waited for the spread of rumors about Agrippina championing Plautus to act against her. Tacitus implies as much when, immediately after stating that Agrippina and Octavia were allied, he claims that Agrippina was in search of a party and its leader, something which neither she nor Octavia could be (*Ann.* 13.18).

Later, during the build-up to the murder of Agrippina, Tacitus demonstrates the link between Agrippina and Octavia to still be strong. The main reason given by Tacitus for Nero murdering his mother is Poppaea's desire for marriage. Nero could not accomplish this without first divorcing Octavia, and that scenario is considered impossible with Agrippina still alive. Modern authors admit to being at somewhat of a loss as to why Nero

chose to act when he did in killing Agrippina[109]. For Tacitus, however, the matricide fits into his paradigm of womanly rivalry in the imperial court, and the rivalry in this situation involves Poppaea against both Agrippina and Octavia.

The murders of these two women frame book fourteen, and certain recurring characters and motifs link them inextricably. Poppaea, Anicetus, and Burrus all figure into the accounts of Agrippina and Octavia's deaths, and they largely maintain similar roles in the two circumstances. Burrus is remarkable in that he establishes a further parallel between Agrippina and Octavia. A significant portion of the discussion in chapter two dealt with the idea that Agrippina granted Nero the empire and felt her crimes justified by his rule. Following Agrippina's death, when Nero brings up the possibility of divorcing Octavia, it is Burrus who makes sure to remind him that even now the empire is not entirely his: "καίτοι τοῦ Βούρρου ἐναντιουμένου αὐτῷ καὶ κωλύοντος ἀποπέμψασθαι, καί ποτε εἰπόντος 'οὐκοῦν καὶ τὴν προῖκα αὐτῇ'τοῦτ' ἔστι τὴν ἡγεμονίαν 'ἀπόδος'," (Dio 62.13.2, When Burrus opposed him and stopped him from sending her away, he once said "Then return her dowry to her," the dowry being the empire.) Burrus thus attributes to Octavia the same influence over Nero which Agrippina claimed for herself, and he demonstrates his loyalty to her in similar fashion to his defense of Agrippina[110]. Burrus' combined defense of Agrippina and Octavia does not speak to the relationship between them, but it does imply an association in his mind between the two of them. Both the nature of Burrus' defense of Octavia and the fact that he is the one defending her (as opposed to Seneca) remind the readers of Agrippina.

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[109] The timeline of events, foremost among them being the lapse of three years between Agrippina's death and the divorce, has caused some (Barrett 181, Bauman 204) to question Poppaea's involvement in the matricide.

[110] Two instances of Burrus defending Agrippina are, first, when he convinced Nero to give her a trial at all rather than simply execute her following the Plautus accusation (*Ann.* 13.20) and, second, when he refused to have the Praetorian Guard involved in her murder (*Ann.* 14.7).

A final instance where Agrippina and Octavia are mentioned together is during the death narrative of Octavia. Paul Murgatroyd makes a convincing argument that, of the many deaths described by Tacitus under the reign of Nero, that of Octavia is especially poignant and significant to the author[111]. Evidence of its significance comes from his treatment of the deaths of Sulla and Plautus, which Murgatroyd claims to have a spatial as well as emotional build-up, from one paragraph for Sulla to two for Plautus and five for Octavia[112]. Each of these deaths has a preceding incident which foreshadows it. Burrus and Pallas face charges of supporting Sulla in a plot for revolution (*Ann.* 13.23), and Agrippina is charged with supporting Plautus (13.19). Octavia is separated from these two in that she is never implicated in any direct plot against Nero, but her foreshadowing does not come from accusations against her. Instead Tacitus creates a sense of foreboding for her death through her association with Agrippina. In order to seal this association, Tacitus relates that Octavia's final appeal for clemency was an invocation of Agrippina. Murgatroyd claims that this appeal is the result of either naiveté or panic[113], and while this need not be disputed, Tacitus' purpose in bringing up the appeal to Agrippina serves his agenda of associating the two women more than reflecting the reality of what was said during an execution carried out in a remote location.

The evidence in Tacitus leads to the assumption that Agrippina and Octavia had a somewhat less tortured relationship than either Agrippina and Britannicus or Agrippina and Nero. While he does not specifically state this (aside from the girl's desperate pleas at her death, she is never described speaking or expressing any emotion), the few instances involving Octavia always bear some recourse to the role of Agrippina in her life. What is

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[111] Paul Murgatroyd, "Tacitus and the Death of Octavia," *Greece and Rome* 55 (2008), 263-73.
[112] Murgatroyd 266.
[113] Murgatroyd 272.

more, while Agrippina's meddling is a contributing factor to Nero's decision to kill Britannicus, Octavia's appeal to her in the final moments of her life coupled with Poppaea's very similar hostility to Agrippina before she sets her sights directly on Octavia implies the role of a protectress for Agrippina over Octavia. Octavia's lack of development as an individual in the narrative likely contributes to the ease with which she can be associated with Agrippina through external factors, such as the argument that Nero owes his reign to both women and their popularity among the people which Nero must quell by force[114].

Tacitus is not the only source to conjure up an association between Agrippina and Octavia. Closer to the events at hand, the presumably Flavian *Octavia* contains the first indications of association between the two, and there are signs that the play influenced Tacitus in his writing of *Annales*[115]. In the lyric prologue, Octavia laments the deaths of her parents and takes a few swipes at Agrippina, referring to her directly as *saeva noverca* (21). After an interlude by the nurse, who largely parrots what Octavia has said and presages what she will say next, Octavia turns her attention to her brother, whom she claims, "fuerat spes una mihi/totque malorum breve solamen," (68-9, he had been the sole hope for me and a brief comfort from so many evils.). Just as in Tacitus, though, Britannicus in *Octavia* serves as a focal point for the grief of both Octavia and Agrippina. These lines in particular probably influenced his description of Agrippina rather than Octavia. Before and after the murder of Britannicus, Tacitus uses similar language to state the importance of the young prince to Agrippina, referring to him as "solum … sibi provisum" (*Ann.*13.14, the sole foresight to her advantage) and "sibi supremum auxilium" (*Ann.* 13.16, her greatest

[114] The similar instances, narrated with some identical vocabulary, of spontaneous crowds of people rallying in support of Agrippina and Octavia shortly before their deaths is dealt with in the chapter on "Agrippina as *Incesta*".

[115] Olivier Devillers gives a detailed account of passages in *Annales* reflecting the language and themes of *Octavia*; "L'Octavie et les Annales de Tacite," *Vita Latina* (2000): 51-66.

asset). Tacitus' wordplay here is remarkable because the two words he chooses to express the importance of Britannicus to Agrippina share similar meanings to those spoken by the Octavia character, but they have less emotive force. In essence, his Agrippina becomes a less sympathetic version of her stepdaughter.

Later in the dialogue between Octavia and her nurse, the nurse gives a long account of how Agrippina single-handedly destroyed the house of Claudius and created the monster who then destroyed her (137-66). The final lines of her speech change their tune and mourn the death of Britannicus, noting that, "saeva cui lacrimas dedit/etiam noverca, cum rogis artus tuos/dedit cremandos," (170-72, (A boy) over whom even his wicked stepmother wept as she gave your body to the pyre to be cremated). The nurse's statement here undercuts her vicious portrayal of Agrippina in the immediately preceding lines by the introduction of her grief, but this twofold portrayal of Agrippina is characteristic of other points in the play that focus on her. During the description of her death by the chorus following the dialogue, the chorus refers to Agrippina as the author of Britannicus' funeral just after they also have her admit to the death of Claudius (*Oct*. 340-41). Boyle here states that Agrippina confesses too much, but he draws a distinction between these words of the chorus and the blame which Agrippina's ghost places directly at the feet of Nero for Britannicus' death at lines 616-617[116]. This discrepancy between the chorus opposed to Octavia's nurse and the ghost of Agrippina could reflect that the playwright acknowledged rumors of Agrippina's involvement in the death of Britannicus. If such is the case, the author comes down squarely on the side that Agrippina was not actually involved by having two people who are

[116] A.J. Boyle, *Octavia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ad 341.

intimate with the royal household deny any involvement on her part[117]. This direct refutation of Agrippina's involvement in the murder of Britannicus creates the focal point from which Tacitus could develop his mirroring of Agrippina and Octavia.

Octavia is especially noteworthy, however, because, more than simply creating a bond between Octavia and Agrippina, it also recognizes a link between these two women and the goddess Juno, which brings us back to the tradition of the goddess as *saeva noverca* and Seneca's *Hercules Furens*. Naturally, in *Octavia* the protagonist and her nurse refer to Agrippina multiple times as *noverca* (21, 151, 171). After these enumerations of the term, the nurse urges Octavia to be as patient as Juno was with Juppiter given the similarity in their situations with unfaithful husbands and stepchildren born to *paelices*. Anyone familiar with the tradition of Juno, though, would have recognized the *nonsequitur* in this argument. As has been demonstrated, the Juno of myth did not patiently tolerate her rivals or suffer stepchildren to be born and assume places in the heavens. Rather, Juno punished even innocent rivals like Callisto, and she also had no qualms about attacking the offspring of these unions. The exhortative speech of the nurse recalls the complaint of Juno in *Hercules Furens* that she no longer has a place in the heavens because of the many newly arrived descendants and lovers of her husband:

> hinc Arctos alta parte glacialis poli
> sublime classes sidus Argolicas agit;
> hinc, qua recenti uere laxatur dies,
> Tyriae per undas uector Europae nitet;
> illinc timendum ratibus ac ponto gregem
> passim uagantes exerunt Atlantides;
> ferro minax hinc terret Orion deos
> suasque Perseus aureus stellas habet;
> hinc clara gemini signa Tyndaridae micant

[117] Boyle (2008) ad 619-31 argues that ghosts in the Senecan tradition have a reputation for honesty because of their access to supernatural knowledge. This serves to increase the credibility of the ghost of Agrippina in her denial of responsibility for the death of Britannicus.

quibusque natis mobilis tellus stetit.
nec ipse tantum Bacchus aut Bacchi parens
adiere superos: ne qua pars probro uacet,
mundus puellae serta Cnosiacae gerit. (6-18)

Here the Arcan constellation leads Argive ships from the sublime height of the northern pole; here in the place where recently the day is released, the conductor of Tyrian Europa through the waves shines forth; there the wandering descendents of Atlas depart here and there, a group which must be feared on their oars and on the sea; here threatening Orion frightens the gods with a sword and golden Perseus has his own stars; here the bright signals of the Tyndaraean twins glisten and which sons the traveling earth has stood upon. Nor does Bacchus himself nor his mother approach the gods in such a manner: so that no place lay empty for shame, the world bears the garlands of a Cretan girl.

No doubt Seneca could not have given an exhaustive list of Juno's rivals and stepchildren because of the sheer number of Juppiter's affairs. The fact that these examples make up only a fraction of the possible choices is what makes the comparison with the nurse's speech in *Octavia* all the more striking. Using most of the examples listed above and drawing in no others not mentioned in the prologue of *Hercules Furens*, the nurse makes the untenable argument that Juno acted almost stoically in relation to Juppiter's other offspring. Thus she claims:

Passa est similes ipsa dolores
    regina deum,
cum se formas uertit in omnes
dominus caeli diuumque pater
et modo pennas sumpsit oloris,
modo Sidonii cornua tauri;
aureus idem fluxit in imbri;
fulgent caelo sidera Ledae,
patrio residet Bacchus Olympo,
deus Alcides possidet Heben
nec Iunonis iam timet iras,
cuius gener est qui fuit hostis. (201-12)

The queen of the gods herself endured similar hardships, when the lord of heaven and father of the gods transformed himself into various forms and once put on the feathers of a swan, once the horns of a Sidonian bull; the same one poured down as gold in a shower of rain; the stars of Leda shine in the sky, Bacchus dwells in his Olympian fatherland, the god descended from

> Alceus has Hebe and he no longer fears the wrath of Juno, whose son-in-law he is who once was an enemy.

The only stepchild or rival not mentioned by Juno in the passage of *Hercules Furens* above but mentioned by the nurse in her speech is Hercules. This is, of course, because following the brief enumeration of other stepchildren, Juno spends the rest of her prologue haranguing Hercules and plotting against him. The nurse alludes to this by giving more lines to her description of Hercules and finishes by noting that they were once enemies. This statement oversimplifies the relationship between Juno and Hercules to the point of neglecting the tradition behind them.

This oversimplification dilutes the force of the nurse's argument so that one must ask what the author intended by including it. The dialogue between a tragic protagonist and a nurse has a long tradition dating back to Euripides, and Seneca often makes use of it (*Phaedra*, *Medea*, *Agamemnon*). Typically occurring early in the play, the dialogue serves to present the complicated circumstances of the protagonists as well as their often disturbed psyche[118]. This strategy frames the moral and dramatic understanding of the play, with the nurse serving as the voice of reason that ultimately goes unheard. While the motif is reflected by the author of *Octavia*, the nurse's argument does not achieve the same effect as the discourses of nurses usually do in Seneca's plays. The scene in *Octavia* has little in common with the other nurse dialogues. Phaedra, Medea, and Clytemnestra all take their fates into their own hands and at least attempt to exercise control over their lives. Octavia, by contrast, only begins the process of creating such a plot: "OCT. Extinguat et me, ne manu nostra cadat./ NUTR. Natura vires non dedit tantas tibi. OCT. Dolor ira maeror miseriae luctus dabunt," (174-76, OCT. He must kill me, too, or fall by my hand. NUTR. Nature's not given you the strength for that. OCT. Pain, anger, sorrow misery, grief will

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[118] See chapter two for a discussion of Clytemnestra's revelation of her psyche during her dialogue with her nurse.

give it[119].). For just a moment Octavia sounds like the tragic protagonist ready to assume control of a situation gone too far, but these seeds of motivation do not produce any further planning[120]. Instead, what follows is the nurse's speech in which she makes her self-contradictory argument that Octavia should be like Juno.

If the scene between Octavia and the nurse departs so much from the Senecan tradition and produces neither a protagonist ready to take extreme action nor a proper voice of reason, what purpose does it serve? Just as the protagonist-nurse dialogue here mimics Senecan tragedy in form but not substance, so too is Octavia herself meant to mimic in form but not substance. The nurse's argument combines with repeated references to Octavia as "soror Augusti" (220, 284, 658) in which there is a direct development of Octavia's marital status: first as "terris altera Juno,/soror Augusti coniunxque" (219-20, another Juno on earth, the sister and wife of the Augustus); then the chorus asks, while also comparing her to Juno, "soror Augusti sociata toris cur a patria pellitur aula," (284-5, Why is the sister of the Augustus pushed from her father's court after she was married?); and finally Octavia admits "soror Augusti, non uxor ero," (658, I will be the sister, not the wife, of the Augustus.). This continual reminder of Octavia's permanent place as the sister of Nero, even as her marital status with him is questioned and changed, again draws attention back to Juno, who opens *Hercules Furens* with the lines "Soror Tonantis – hoc enim solum mihi/nomen relictum est," (1-2, Sister of the Thunderer – for that title alone has been left to me).

What, then, can be made of these overlapping associations between Octavia, Agrippina, and Juno? The many allusions to Juno in relation to Octavia in *Hercules Furens*

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[119] Translation by Boyle (2008).
[120] Joe Park Poe argues as much in his article "Octavia Praetexta and Its Senecan Model," *American Journal of Philology* 110.3 (1989), 447-8, claiming that the author of Octavia could not rely solely on the archetype of the virtuous Roman woman to craft "a strong-mided but articulate victim."

are striking precisely because the characters are so different. Similarly, an association between Agrippina and Octavia would seem discordant at first because of the hostility shown to the former figure in contrast to the complete sympathy with the latter. The strong case made by the author for exonerating Agrippina from the death of Britannicus softens her image, even if only slightly. There is also Octavia's brief flirtation with thoughts of violence against her husband/brother. Her words could easily be envisioned as coming from Juno or Agrippina, but coming from this otherwise docile girl, the effect is meant to startle. Thus, through imagery, rhetoric, and circumstance, the author of the Octavia blends the personalities of these three figures to create a persistent connection between the three of them.

With Octavia as the central point of this triangular relationship, the author also takes up Seneca's earlier connection of Agrippina to Juno as *saeva noverca*. The reproduction of the Juno association stems from Seneca recasting his portrayal of the goddess to suit his political motives in the mid 50s. The subtle indications from Seneca in the *Apocolocyntosis* allow the author of *Octavia* to take up the implied stepmother association in his own work, in which he also draws the first known connection between the two women. Illustrating the success of Seneca's endeavor, it is this transmission of the *saeva noverca* tradition which contributes forcefully to the image of Agrippina that has come down to modern readers through Tacitus' *Annales*.

Epilogue

The close relationship between female pro/antagonists within Senecan tragedy and the characterization of Agrippina is extensive. This relationship is also highly nuanced. Certain works seem to intentionally create a parallel with Agrippina, others perhaps only develop the rhetorical tropes which Seneca later attached to her, and others serve as a prism through which to look back at another text and see a new meaning in the actions and words of a particular character. The portrait of Agrippina distilled into the three stereotypes discussed stems from a combination of these antagonists, but at the same time, like Agrippina, many of the antagonists possess overlapping characteristics of the types.

The *dux femina* and the *saeva noverca* interchange relatively easily, but the relative paucity of the *incesta* association for historical Romans first draws attention to Agrippina. It is this association that also brings to bear the most direct literary evidence through the transmission of the Jocasta/Agrippina death quote from *Oedipus* to his later *Phoenissae*, which is then picked up by the author of *Octavia*, and finally by Tacitus. Furthermore, the dramatic action within *Phoenissae* directly inverts how Tacitus describes the conflict between Nero and Britannicus following the death of Claudius. The generally accepted later date of authorship of *Phoenissae* in comparison to all of the other tragedies indicates that it could have been written near the end of Seneca's life, when, like Oedipus within the play, he may have looked upon his role in the reign of Nero with the same hostility which Oedipus looks upon his own reign.

The *dux femina* trope places Agrippina in the tradition of loathed women such as Cleopatra, but this tradition is shared also by her mother in more sympathetic fashion. Like Messalina before her, Agrippina dispatches female rivals such as Lollia Paulina and Domitia Lepida with impunity, but going further, she becomes the likeness of Clytemnestra

when she murders Claudius. More than even this, however, she parallels Seneca's Clytemnestra in that both claim to murder their husbands for the sake of their children only to become inimical to them almost immediately. Medea brings the intensity of the *dux femina* to its apex through her successful destruction of her rival, her children, and the Corinthian state, all the while absolving herself of her crimes by placing the blame on Jason. These two plays contained the strongest arguments against female tyranny, and both Medea and Clytemnestra embody perfectly the ferocity with which Tacitus so often characterizes Agrippina.

Juno in *Hercules Furens* continues a tradition established by Virgil and Ovid, but Seneca returns focus to her by parodying this play in his *Apocolocyntosis*, which ostensibly mocks the recently dead emperor but also makes latent attacks on his surviving widow to diminish the prominence of her position as priestess. These attacks come in the midst of a fierce power struggle between Seneca and Agrippina for influence over Nero, which ultimately ends in the death of Britannicus before a temporary truce appears to be called. To an extent, Agrippina's wicked stepmother association carries more ambivalence in regard to her relationship with Octavia than with Britannicus. Both Tacitus and the author of *Octavia* create an association between the two through similar language, such as those passages in Tacitus which describe popular crowds in support of each woman being dispersed by Nero's soldiers shortly before each of their deaths, or through double association, as the author of *Octavia* does with the comparison between gentle Octavia and vengeful Juno. Her portrayed tendency to shift allegiances based upon self-interest, nonetheless, renders her dangerous to both her stepchildren and her natural son.

Arguing the connection between literary and historical figures has pitfalls and difficulties. Parallels between mythological figures and historical figures can be found *ad*

infinitum, and even having an author write about a character who seems to match an historical figure contemporary with that author does not prove an intended parallel. What makes the argument in this work so appealing and powerful are the repeated instances of major female characters in Seneca's plays corresponding to one aspect or another of the conception which survives of Agrippina the Younger. She is nearly unique among Roman women in the number of stereotypes which are attached to her memory. Additionally, at least as Tacitus would have her remembered, she was a woman unafraid to push the boundaries of what was acceptable for her to do as sister, wife, and mother of the *princeps*. No Roman woman before her could have boasted of such an intimate connection to as many Roman emperors, and she managed to outlive, or out-maneuver, her contemporaries who had similar pedigrees.

Seneca, whose relationship with Agrippina was complicated, to say the least, proved to be a poor investment in her own future fortune when she recalled him from exile. Unlike his comrade Burrus or Agrippina's other favorite, Pallas, Seneca never provided Agrippina any direct service in recompense for her patronage. Quite the contrary, in moments of crisis for Agrippina, he was either the engineer of her troubles, as with Nero's early actions to whittle away at her power, or he readily cooperated with Nero against her, as with his first asking Burrus if the guard could dispatch her following the failed shipwreck attempt and then turning to Anicetus to finish the job after Burrus refuses. Nevertheless, as he actively worked against his mistress, his attempts to tar her image through mythological association in his tragedies, while perhaps successful at the time, created a figure of legend whose memory later authors have kept alive with their colorful and creative portrayals of her.

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