

MERETRIX AUGUSTA:
A LITERARY EXAMINATION OF MESSALINA
IN TACITUS AND JUVENAL

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IN TACITUS AND JUVENAL

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ABSTRACT

Messalina's position at the pinnacle of power available to women in the Roman principate coupled with her notorious conduct made the empress an excellent target for Roman authors in the subsequent generations. In particular, Juvenal and Tacitus used Messalina and her illicit activities in their condemnations against the erosion of traditional Roman values.

In this thesis I examine the Latin text of Juvenal and Tacitus with special attention being paid to sound, vocabulary, structure, humour, and technical skills, and how the two authors employ these to enhance their literary portrait of Messalina. Also, I contrast the two portraits of the empress and discuss the causes of any similarities and differences found in them. In the end the reader is provided with an exhaustive look at the Latin and how the writers manipulate it in order to skew their audience's perception of Messalina.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

It is only natural to suspect the veracity of a satirist such as Juvenal. Often an author will manipulate a situation or a character in such a way that will provide the most satirical punch. But satirists are not the only Roman authors who try to affect their reader's perception. Rome's rhetorical education gave all writers the tools they needed for this purpose. An in-depth examination of the Latin reveals these methods of manipulation. I have endeavoured to explore the works of Juvenal and Tacitus which concern the exploits of Messalina, the wife of Claudius. This careful analysis will allow me to compare how each author used Messalina for their own purpose, and how they used language to make the reader hostile towards her. In my exploration I have focused on the sound, rhythm, language, and structure of the Latin.

Valeria Messalina, in her short time as empress of Rome, became known as a woman consumed by greed and lust. According to the ancient sources she brought low many men and women who hindered the gratification of her desires. She seems to have had numerous affairs, and to have plotted many murders. The ancient record does not paint a kind or sympathetic picture of her, and modern scholars generally accept the

ancient portrayal.¹ Messalina is included amongst the list of inadequate imperial women in the Julio-Claudian family, such as Julia, the promiscuous daughter of Augustus, and Agrippina the Younger. She also cannot help but suffer when compared to the reportedly unassailable virtue of Agrippina the Elder.

Unfortunately not much is known about Messalina's early life. Due to a break in the text, the surviving *Annals* of Tacitus have no information concerning the reign of Gaius and the early years of Claudius. At the point at which the narrative resumes Claudius and Messalina are already married. This most likely occurred in AD 38 or 39. The remaining chroniclers of the early principate are conspicuously silent about her life before she became empress. Even her age when she was married is not very clear, but all agree that she was a great deal younger than Claudius was; most likely she was born before AD 20.² She was the daughter of Domitia Lepida, which made her the great granddaughter of Mark Antony and Octavia, the sister of Augustus. This breeding rendered her quite fit for union with an emperor. And a fruitful union it was, since Messalina bore her husband two children, Octavia, who was born in AD 39 or 40, and Britannicus, who was born in AD 41. Messalina's time as mother and empress ended in AD 48 when she was executed.

¹ Tacitus *Ann.* 11.1-36 and Dio 60.8-28 provide the main narrative information concerning Messalina's life, while J 6.115-132, 10.329-345 and Pliny the Elder *NH* 83.172 add anecdotal information. The list of modern scholars who have contributed to the study of Messalina include, among others, H. STADELMANN, R. BAUMAN, S. JOSHEL, G. FERRERO, J. BALDSON, B. LEVICK, S. PEROWNE, and G. GIACOSA.

² *OCD* s.v. Valeria Messalina

As an empress Messalina seems to have been lacking. She is said to have used her considerable influence over Claudius for her own frivolous and even criminal appetites. According to Dio, Messalina and the imperial freedmen would secure the death of rivals with accusations of treason.³ Any manner of reason would spur her to punish men and women: jealousy, greed, lust. Numerous victims of every social class are recorded in the ancient texts. According to Tacitus, Messalina organised the execution of Decimus Valerius Asiaticus, twice consul, not only because she was upset that he had been involved in an affair with Poppaea Sabina, who was driven to suicide by the empress, but also because she desired his beautiful gardens.⁴

Messalina's lust reportedly equalled her fierce temper. The long list of her infidelities, which included men from every social stratum, leads one to wonder where she found the time to persecute her enemies with such vigour. Her indiscretions became proverbial. Pliny related that Messalina successfully defeated a notoriously energetic prostitute by servicing twenty-five men in one day.⁵ The ancient chroniclers document other achievements of such magnitude. Dio claimed that the empress was accustomed to force prominent men of the empire to watch their wives commit adultery in the imperial palace, and those, who refused to provide their wives for this spectacle, she destroyed.⁶

³ Dio 60.14.1.

⁴ Tac. Ann. 11.1.

⁵ Pliny NH 83.172.

⁶ Dio 60.18.1.

Messalina's affair with Mnester was particularly infamous. A popular actor at the time, he is said to have initially spurned Messalina's aggressive advances, but she convinced Claudius to place him under her charge, and thus he was helpless.⁷ The empress was so enamoured of her pet actor that she had a mass of bronze, which had formerly been coins bearing the late Gaius' portrait, made into a statue of Mnester.⁸

Messalina's most outrageous exploit was her marriage to Gaius Silius, even though she was still married to Claudius. Before this ill-fated wedding, she seems to have been completely free to gratify her every carnal desire, while Claudius remained ignorant of or turned a blind eye towards her indiscretions. The wedding changed everything. Narcissus, an imperial freedman, fearing that Silius, who was consul-designate, could depose the emperor, hastened to inform Claudius of the entire sordid situation. Indecision plagued Claudius, who vacillated between outrage and affection. Finally Narcissus sent a soldier to execute the emperor's wife. Messalina died in the gardens of Lucullus, which she had acquired through the murder of Decimus Valerius Asiaticus.

The attitude of the ancient authors towards Messalina is clearly negative. They charge her with a great number of crimes and fail to include any positive characteristics she might have had. In the works of Tacitus, Juvenal, Dio, and Pliny, Messalina's mind was completely dominated by her insatiable lust. This incredible lust motivated many of the murders, which Messalina ordered. She, without hesitation or remorse, brought about

⁷ Tac. Ann. 11.36.

the destruction of men who were foolish enough to reject her interest. In addition, this excessive desire caused Messalina to grow bored with ordinary infidelities and to seek out even more scandalous encounters. This led to her disastrous marriage to Silius.

Despite all of her vices and faults, in the eyes of Dio, Tacitus, and Juvenal, Messalina did not covet political power. The ancient authors never claim that she attacked an enemy in order to remove a political rival, or to gain any political influence. The empress seems to have been uninterested in determining either state or foreign policy, unlike Agrippina the Younger. She used her influence over Claudius for her own capricious wants. According to Tacitus, Silius convinced Messalina to get openly married. She was hesitant because she feared that, once he held supreme power, he would remove her.⁹ Thus she demonstrated that she possessed feminine failings, which drove her towards frivolous affairs and away from political ambition. Even in Juvenal's account of the marriage, in which Juvenal asserts that Messalina was forcing Silius to marry her, there is no mention of any reason other than the empress' own fanciful desire.¹⁰

The modern attitude towards Messalina faithfully reproduces, for the most part, that of the ancient sources. Thus her traits of lust, violence, and indifference towards

⁸ Dio 60.22.3.

⁹ Tac. Ann 11.26.

¹⁰ J. 10.229-345.

politics rise to the front of discussions concerning the empress.¹¹ While most agree that Messalina was likely not faithful to Claudius, some scholars are hesitant to accept every story in the ancient record. Some of the more shocking acts attributed to her may be fabrications, or at least exaggerations. In a city such as Rome, her failings would not have been so notable had she not been married to the emperor. But due to her position at the pinnacle of the Mediterranean world, any mistakes of hers would have been amplified greatly.¹² And in deference to the ancient sources, many modern historians discount any political motivations behind Messalina's actions.¹³

However some modern scholars disagree with the traditional ancient picture of Messalina. Levick attributes, instead of unthinking lust, a certain amount of political savvy to Messalina's actions.¹⁴ She argues that Messalina engaged in affairs with men to protect her and her son's position: "she used sex as means of compromising and controlling politicians."¹⁵ This accounts for her profusion of affairs. And Levick claims that Messalina's attacks on men, such as Asiaticus, may have been under the direction of Claudius, and that he was using her as a proxy in order to avoid the ill will incurred from

¹¹ see e.g. BALDSON, 103-104, G. GIACOSA, 32, PEROWNE, 60.

¹² FERRERO, 218.

¹³ see e.g. STADELMANN, 207, FERRERO, 220.

¹⁴ LEVICK is supported by BAUMAN who also contends that Messalina's crimes were committed to further her political desires. JOSHEL provides strong warnings about accepting Tacitus' accounts of Messalina's crimes as the complete truth.

¹⁵ LEVICK, 56.

executing Roman citizens without a trial.¹⁶ Levick even maintains that Messalina may have orchestrated the 'marriage' to Silius, since she feared the growing hostility of the imperial freedman, which spawned from attack against Polybius.¹⁷ The ceremony and 'marriage', which were proof of good faith, would have provided her with a strong and loyal ally who would protect her from the intrigues of the freedmen.

Messalina has some strong competition for the title of most disreputable member of the imperial family. Claudius married Agrippina the Younger soon after Messalina's execution. Agrippina possessed impeccable ancestry, like Messalina. She was the daughter of Germanicus, and the great granddaughter of Augustus. Both women were much younger than Claudius was when they married him. The ancient authors attribute similar faults to both women. Neither woman seems to have had much respect for her imperial husband, and both freely conducted their nefarious affairs without fear of reprisal. Charges of infidelity, excessive cruelty, and manipulation seem common when an ancient author is discussing a woman whom he clearly does not favour. Also, Tacitus may have been motivated by the almost universal contempt for Claudius amongst ancient historians to emphasise and exaggerate the faults of both these women. By thoroughly branding both women as villains, Tacitus doubles the idiocy of Claudius, who married these two strumpets. Thus Messalina and Agrippina the Younger share some characteristics according to the ancient sources, even though they seem to have differing wants.

¹⁶LEVICK, 59.

Agrippina appears far more ambitious than the previous wife of Claudius does. This significant division provides the reader with a warning. Even though Tacitus condemns the two wives of Claudius with some similar offences, they differed in their desires. The ancient record suggests that the wish to place her son from a previous marriage, Nero, on the throne, drove Agrippina to commit numerous crimes, just as Messalina's uncontrollable lust had. Agrippina acted with such despotism that she appeared to have manly qualities.¹⁸ Thus we see that not all of the 'imperial whores' were identical.

Another very prominent woman in Tacitus was Agrippina the Elder. Since few women in Tacitus are discussed in depth, the typical reaction of the reader would be to compare the longer sketches of these two women. So it looks as if Tacitus was thus deliberately manipulating his readers. This Agrippina provides a measure of decency for the Julio-Claudian family. As the daughter of Julia and Agrippa, Agrippina was the granddaughter of Augustus, and she was depicted as the model of proper womanly virtues. She was married to Germanicus, a favoured son of Rome, and her faithfulness and morality are noted in Tacitus.¹⁹ She was a constant companion of her husband, and she even travelled to the frontiers with him while she was pregnant.²⁰ Agrippina demonstrated her virtue after the death of her beloved husband. During this time of her

¹⁷ LEVICK, 66.

¹⁸ Tac. Ann. 12.7.

¹⁹ Tac. Ann. 1.33.

life, according to Tacitus, Agrippina suffered greatly. Her complaints to Tiberius the emperor gained her a severe flogging, which ruined one of her eyes.²¹ But she remained stubbornly faithful to her moral code. She dutifully transported the ashes of her husband home to Rome in accordance with his wishes. She also, when gripped by grief and loneliness, begged Tiberius to provide her with a husband because that was the only decent manner to alleviate her misery.²²

Finally, alone and at the mercy of Tiberius, Agrippina resolved to starve herself to death. Despite efforts to force her to eat she was successful.²³ Tacitus uses this final act of courage to demonstrate Agrippina's moral superiority over Messalina. According to Tacitus, Agrippina possessed sufficient bravery to face her demise with a very masculine determination. Messalina, on the other hand, schemed and plotted to save her own life, despite the inevitability of her end. She was unable or unwilling to do the proper thing and kill herself, but instead cowered in the gardens of Lucullus, weeping and moaning. It is written that even when the armed soldiers arrived, she could not thrust the dagger into her own heart, and thus display some respectability. Most likely the reader would compare these two death scenes, which nicely sum up the difference between Agrippina the Elder and Messalina. Likewise, the reader would compare each woman's behaviour and attitudes towards their husbands: Messalina's wanton adultery and Agrippina's

²⁰ Tac. Ann. 1.40.

²¹ Suet. Tib. 53.

²² Tac. Ann. 4.53.

staunch fidelity. The perhaps suspiciously virtuous picture of Agrippina which Tacitus paints aids the author in his efforts to blacken the images of any less than perfect women who follow. The comparison that the reader makes can only damage their representation further.

²³ Suet. Tib. 53.

CHAPTER TWO: JUVENAL 6.115-132¹

According to Highet, the sixth satire of Juvenal is not an attack against ‘bad women’, but it is rather a denunciation of marriage and wives.² Juvenal bitterly laments the loss of the morality and chastity of Roman wives, which in the past had been the foundation of Rome’s greatness. The first section, which spans from the very beginning to line 132, examines the departure of chastity from earth, and the result this has upon the Roman women.³ The passage concerning Messalina, which begins in line 115 and ends in line 132, provides the climax of the first section. In this satire, Messalina serves as the ultimate example of the corruption of Roman wives. During her life, she was the wife of the emperor Claudius, which placed her in the highest position a woman could have. But instead of providing the women of Rome with a chaste role model, as a good aristocrat should, she focussed upon her own uncontrolled lust. Due to her place at the head of Roman society, and in view of the sheer outrageousness of her crimes, Messalina’s trip to

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the text being used is the Oxford Classical Text by W. V. Clausen.

² HIGHET, 91.

³ HIGHET, 99 n.8.

the brothel is a perfect climax to the section on adultery, which extends from line 1 to line 132.⁴

Juvenal's examination of Eppia, a senator's wife who is enamoured with a gladiator, immediately precedes Messalina's story. The empress' trip to the brothel builds upon Eppia's own misdeed. Juvenal intends the disgust of the reader, which has been steadily rising, to culminate with his model of licentiousness, Messalina. While Eppia is the wife of a senator, Messalina is the wife of the emperor. Eppia conducts her affair with only one man, while Messalina's one night features numerous lovers. The contrast of these two women causes the empress to appear even more corrupt.

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Juvenal begins his section about Messalina with a direct command to the reader. By using both *respice* and *audi*, he demands the attention of both hearing and sight, which creates emphasis. The reader is enjoined to not only look back upon the events but to also listen. Her crimes were so bad that, even in Juvenal's day, they are still being talked about. To add force to his commands, Juvenal frames the line with the two imperative verbs, which creates the sense that the knowledge of Messalina's crimes was all over Rome. From the very beginning, Juvenal emphasises the magnitude of Messalina's crimes.

The rhythm and sound of this line lend strength to Juvenal's damnation of both Claudius and Messalina. The three spondees add gravity and give emphasis to *rivales*

⁴ COFFEY, 141.

divorum (115), which again draws attention to the incredible importance of Messalina and Claudius. This will increase the shock when Messalina's horrible crime is later revealed. The slow measured rhythm of the spondees also creates a sense of mock solemnity. Clearly neither Claudius nor Messalina deserve to be remembered as dignified people. The spondees, which centre around *rivales divorum*, draw more attention to this damning phrase. This stress is aided by the sound of the line: the repeated 'r' sounds of *rivales divorum* and the 'au' sounds in *Claudius audi*.

Rivales divorum is highly ironical.⁵ Even though Claudius was deified, rarely did he receive the respect owed to a god or even to one closely associated with the gods. Instead, many considered him a buffoon. And if he were indeed a 'peer of the gods', he would have had the omniscience to be aware of Messalina's escapades and the power to prevent them. But he remained oblivious to them and thus was unable to stop them.

The irony of *rivales divorum* is strengthened by the juxtaposition of *divorum* and *Claudius*. It reinforces Claudius' close proximity to the gods. The juxtaposition also emphasises his importance. It reminds the reader of the fact that Claudius was deified after his death. This all increases the baseness of Messalina's crimes, since Claudius' position and power are stressed so much. The juxtaposition also is ironical, since Claudius was considered more like a fool than a god.

⁵ COURTNEY, 275.

Rivales can be used of competitors in love.⁶ This, a secondary sense here, foreshadows Claudius' rivals for the affections of his own wife, Messalina, and the fact that he, a god, must compete with men, who are much inferior to him in both wealth and power. Yet, nevertheless, Messalina prefers their embrace to that of her husband.

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The placement of *uxor* at the end of the line, gives the word extra weight. This highlights the fact that Messalina is not acting in any way as a good *matrona* should. Juvenal, by referring to Claudius and Messalina as *uxor* and *virum*, reminds the reader of the emotional and legal bond that is supposed to exist between this married couple.

Juvenal increases the vividness of the line with repeated 'm' sounds. Not only do they draw the reader's attention to the line but they also produce a murmuring sound in the poetry, which he may have included in order to recreate Claudius mumbling as he sleeps. Or the sound could be included as a nasty jab at Claudius' notorious speech impediment.

Even from the second line, Juvenal begins underlining the great frequency of Messalina's nighttime excursions to the brothel. Temporal clauses with *cum* and the pluperfect indicative are 'generalizing clauses of repeated action'.⁷ Thus this construction lets the reader know that these trips occur on numerous occasions.

⁶ STOCKER, 218. Ov. *A.A.* 3.563, 593.

⁷ WOODCOCK, 195.

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Until this line, Juvenal has not made any direct accusations against Messalina. He has only made veiled reference to the crimes, which Claudius must endure. This all changes with the shocking phrase *meretrix Augusta* (118), which hits like a hammer.⁹ The juxtaposition of these two words is startling. Augusta was a title granted to wives of emperors, such as Livia,¹⁰ while *meretrix* is a general Latin word for a prostitute. Thus Juvenal reveals his true opinion of Messalina. He does not consider her a 'peer of the gods', as he referred to her in the opening line, but rather a common whore. Juvenal is attempting to disturb the reader, by revealing the hideous nature of Messalina. But he is also mocking the empress. Even though the title Augusta was granted to a couple of the imperial wives, when it was voted to Messalina by the Senate, Claudius vetoed the attempt.¹¹ Which means that of her two titles in this line, only one of them, *meretrix*, is authentic.

Augusta, the title, is very similar to the adjective *augustus*, which was used to describe dignified and honourable people. It could mean 'solemn', 'venerable', 'worthy of honour', 'majestic', and 'dignified'.¹² All of these attributes could easily be used to

⁸ Clausen has switched the positions of lines 117 and 118.

⁹ STOCKER, 218. Cf. Cleopatra is called *meretrix regina* in Prop. 3.11.39.

¹⁰ Dio 56.46.1.

¹¹ Dio 60.12.5.

¹² OLD s.v. *augustus* 1a, 2a, 3a.

describe an empress, provided that she was a good empress. However, these attributes most certainly do not apply to Messalina.

The title of Augusta also reminds the reader of Augustus, who enacted several tough anti-adultery laws, which delivered harsh penalties against adulterers. As the reader moves down the poem, the irony becomes painfully obvious.

Meretrix captures the reader's thoughts and imagination. Since Juvenal has not yet named any concrete crimes, he creates a sense of bewilderment concerning this condemnation. The reader is left to wonder, what exactly has Messalina committed to warrant such a denunciation. This encourages further reading.

In order to help draw attention to this important line, there is an internal rhyme. Juvenal may intend for this to lend impact to the damning pronouncement of an imperial wife, Augusta, as a common whore.

This hooded cloak used at night introduces the question, what is Messalina doing that is so immoral that she needs to conceal her identity, even at night? In fact, a *cucullus* was often associated with illicit sexual activity.¹³ And the plurality of the noun, *cucullus*, indicates that Messalina has concealed her identity before.¹⁴ This night is not an isolated incident.

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¹³ RICHLIN, 46. Cf. J. 6.330. When referring to Juvenal in the footnotes, I shall use the abbreviation, J.

¹⁴ COURTNEY, 276.

Messalina's preference of a mat over her imperial bed is absurd and shocking. But not only does she prefer the mat to her comfortable bed, she actually enjoys it.¹⁵ Obviously this makes no sense. In satire, this type of mat is often the sleeping arrangement of prostitutes and slaves.¹⁶ This is hardly the proper conduct for an empress.

The juxtaposition of *Palatino* and *tegetem* accentuates this contrast. Messalina's crimes would be bad enough if it was a normal *matrona* committing them. But the reference to the Palatine reminds the reader that this is the empress who is acting in such a foul manner. This serves to increase the disgust of the reader. The fact that she prefers to spend her nights upon a mat on the cold stone floor instead of in her luxurious bedroom in the palace demonstrates her true base nature. Juvenal does not seem to consider her an empress.

Juvenal is also making the point, as the reader discovers later on, that not only does she prefer a mat to her bed, but she also prefers whoring to sex with her husband or even to sleeping in the same bed. By turning her back on her *cubili* (117), Messalina is turning her back on her marital vows.

Juvenal uses the two types of bedding as symbols for Messalina's two lifestyles. He is making the point that since the empress is so lustful, the only thing she is concerned with in any building is the bed. This heightens the reader's revulsion.

¹⁵ OLD s.v. *praefero* 6a. Cf. WINKLER, 156.

¹⁶ RICHLIN, 46.

Having already alluded to the frequency of Messalina's trips to the brothel (cf. 116, 118), Juvenal adds other verbal clues to aid this. The imperfect tense of the verb, *linquebat*, reinforces the point that this nocturnal trip of Messalina's occurs on a regular basis. In addition, Messalina's behaviour is rather strange. As a lady of obvious importance, the empress would normally travel with a large group, whenever she left the palace. However, on these nightly excursions, Messalina takes with her only one handmaiden, in order that she not be recognised as a lady of consequence. Also, by taking only one servant, Messalina minimises the number of people who know of her nocturnal trips, which further reduces the chance that Claudius might discover her absence.¹⁷

The meaning of *linquebat* helps to further damage Messalina's image in this passage. It can mean 'leave a place', 'forsake', 'abandon', and 'leave behind'.¹⁸ With *Palatino* still ringing in the ears, the verb brings to mind all that she is abandoning: comfort, luxury, decency, her marital vows, and her husband. The absence of an object allows the reader to fill in any or all of these various possibilities.

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Juvenal provides a strong colour contrast through the juxtaposition of *nigrum* and *flavo*. He increases the vividness of this line by enclosing *crinem* with *flavo* and *galero*, in the same manner that Messalina's hair is covered by the wig. The vividness of these

¹⁷ STOCKER, 218. Cf. Hor. *Serm.* 2,7,53

¹⁸ OLD s.v. *linquo* 1a, 2a.

details, along with the language, creates a much clearer picture of Messalina creeping through the streets of Rome, and thus draws the reader further into the narrative.

Juvenal's choice of *nigrum* for the colour of Messalina's hair has much more weight to it than that of a simple physical characteristic. In addition to simply describing her hair as black, *nigrum* can also mean, 'shadowy', 'black with dirt', 'filthy', 'sombre', 'of the dead', and 'evil'.¹⁹ Messalina's hair provides excellent insight into her soul. Her internal depravity and corruption are physically manifested in her hair.

Even Messalina's choice of hair colour for her wig demonstrates how debased she is. Heroines in epic and love poetry would often have blond hair.²⁰ This contrast with heroic women causes Messalina to appear even more vile. Juvenal raises the tone to that of mock solemnity, but this is meant to jeer at her, rather than praise her. And, during this time in Rome, blond hair was the favoured colour of Roman whores. This use of blond wigs is even more abominable, in the opinion of Juvenal, because it was borrowed from the Greeks.²¹ And, as if that weren't bad enough, blond hair was an attribute commonly associated with German slaves. Thus Messalina reduces herself, voluntarily, to the level of a barbarian slave. Unfortunately her reason is not very commendable; blond German whores were the favoured types of girl in Roman brothels.²² Thus, Messalina is attempting to attract more business, in order to fulfil her prodigious lust. Of

¹⁹ OLD s.v. *niger* 3a, 5a, 7a, 9a.

²⁰ RICHLIN, 46.

²¹ STOCKER, 218. Cf. Mart.5.68 and Pers.4.37 and 6.46; Ov *A.A.* 3.163-166.

course, the empress was not the first member of the imperial family to behave in such a disgraceful manner. Caligula would sneak off to brothels, disguised in a wig.²³ Juvenal is condemning Messalina by associating her with such a poorly regarded emperor.

The rhythm of the line is very spondaic, which creates the sense that Messalina is moving methodically and carefully, lest her true identity be revealed due to haste. And the long drawn out rhythm raises the tone of the line, to provide a feeling of solemnity, which, in view of where she is headed and what she is about to commit, is quite humorous. The empress' actions are not in any way solemn or august.

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In line 121, Juvenal finally reveals Messalina's destination, and it becomes quite apparent why she has been so careful to conceal her movements. She arrives at a brothel. *Lupanar* is left till the end of the line, which gives the word extra weight. In addition, the delay of Messalina's objective increases the shock, when it is finally revealed, of such an inappropriate visitation.

In order to create the greatest impact, Juvenal includes several telling details about the brothel. He describes the brothel as *calidum*. This appeal to a sense other than vision is a very vivid touch, which draws the brothel into the reader's imagination. The brothel's warmth contains links to sex, lust, and passion.²⁴ No doubt the building is warm from all the sexual activity going on behind its doors. Perhaps Messalina's own

²² COURTNEY, 120. Cf. Tertull. *De cultu fem.* 2.6.3.

²³ RUPERTI, 343-344. Cf. Suet. Cal.11.

cell is still warm from recent use.²⁵ The brothel's heat reflects Messalina's own feelings, as she becomes sexually aroused just thinking about the night's activities, which are in store for her.

But Juvenal does not stop with just one detail. He also includes *veteri centone*. The exact function of this old quilt is uncertain. It could be either a door covering or the bedding on the floor of her cell.²⁶ Regardless, Juvenal includes this detail to demonstrate how crude this brothel is.²⁷ Since the quilt is *veteri*, it is probably threadbare, stained, and foul smelling. The brothel is so bad that it cannot afford new curtains or bedding. The curtains/bedding could also be worn out from use. This is particularly damning if Juvenal is referring to *centone* as the bedding in the cell. He could intend for the reader to think that this bedding has been used by Messalina for a long time, and subsequently it has been worn out by the huge number of men with whom she has engaged in sexual intercourse as a whore.

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Juvenal's description of Messalina's cell is short yet very effective. The two adjectives he applies to it carry with them great force. The repeated 'am' and 'a' sounds of the phrase, *cellam vacuum atque suam*, focuses the reader's attention on these words.

²⁴ TLL III,1.153.67ff.

²⁵ RUPERTI, 344.

²⁶ The *centone* is much more engaging as bedding, rather than as a curtain, since it conjures up much more sexual imagery that way.

²⁷ WINKLER, 156. Cf. J. 9.139.

Juvenal describes Messalina's cell as empty for two reasons. Firstly, he means it as a joke, since, although the cell is empty when she first arrives, all too soon it will be overflowing with men. Secondly, Juvenal is again stressing the low class of this brothel, since the cells are empty and unadorned.²⁸ The 'am' and 'a' sounds may also simulate the groans of pleasure which will soon be emanating from the cell. Juvenal refers to Messalina's cell as *suam*, as a condemnation. She visits enough to warrant her own cell, and that may be another reason why the cell stands empty.

Messalina's nakedness in the brothel indicates that she is the lowest class of whore.²⁹ She could be naked in order to reduce the interval between clients, by removing the step of disrobing. Or she could be hoping to entice even more men to choose her as a partner, and attempting to satisfy her extraordinary lust.

Juvenal's reference to Messalina's gilded nipples reinforces her nudity, and thus he redoubles the reader's outrage at the fact that Messalina has chosen the part of the lowest of whores. This, in addition, is a very vivid touch, since when confronted with a naked woman, the gaze of most men would firstly fall upon the breasts. Juvenal brings greater attention to it in the poetry by placing the word at the end of the line and making it the only detail of her naked body. He effectively mirrors the entering man's reaction.

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²⁸ WINKLER, 156.

²⁹ COURTNEY, 276. Cf. J. 3.135 and 11.172.

This line grabs the reader's attention quickly, and forcefully. The first word, *prostitit*, is often used of whores selling their wares.³⁰ Its position at the start of the line gives the word added weight. And starting in the previous line, with *papillis* (122), the repetitive 'i', 'p', and 't' sounds capture the reader's attention; *papillis prostitit auratis titulum mentita Lyciscae*.

The false name, Lyciscae, under which Messalina conducts her business, is doubly damaging, in Juvenal's eyes, since the empress of Rome is adopting a Greek name while working as a whore.³¹ This brings to mind Juvenal's hatred of the Greeks and his condemnation of them for the softening of traditional Roman values.³² The wolf element of Messalina's false name brings to mind the *lupus* which nurtured Romulus and Remus. This irony is quite sickening, since she is equating herself with such an important myth in Rome. She is nurturing Romans, just like the wolf, but in a very different sense.

Messalina's assumed name is also highly appropriate. In Latin, *lupa* is a word used of whores, which means that Messalina's assumed name is a truer reflection of her inner nature than her real name.

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Until this line, Juvenal has produced a simple narrative of events. But he includes, quite unexpectedly, an address to Britannicus, the son of Messalina and Claudius. This sudden communication to Britannicus is surprising. The abrupt and

³⁰ Cf. Ov. *Am.* 3.12.8; Sen. *Con.* 1.2.3.

³¹ RICHLIN, 46. Lycisca is mentioned in Mart.4.17.1.

unforeseen shift from narrative to a personal address is jarring, and really lends impact to this line. Juvenal intends to remind the reader that Messalina is a mother, but not a very good one since she is using ‘noble-born Britannicus’ womb’ for such foul purposes.

Juvenal’s labelling of Britannicus as *generose* is very ironical, since he was borne by such a wanton whore. And the reference to Britannicus, the male heir of Claudius, in this context, is quite humorous. Juvenal could be hinting that Britannicus’ parentage may be less than certain, in view of the huge number of men with whom Messalina had affairs.³³

Juvenal frames Britannicus with *tuum* and *ventrem*, which creates the grotesque image of Britannicus actually being in the womb as all of this is occurring. The disgusting notion of Messalina behaving in such an awful manner further blackens her character.

The rhythm enhances the vividness of the line. The line contains mostly dactyls, which, I think, mirrors the enthusiasm with which Messalina offers herself, and reflects the excitement she is feeling because she knows that very soon she will have sex. Of course, even this shameless night will not be enough to satisfy Messalina’s lust for men, as Juvenal later illustrates in line 130. The rhythm may also create a sense of urgency around this scene. Messalina does not just want sex, she needs it, and this feeds her excitement.

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³² For Juvenal’s hatred of Greeks cf. J. 3.60ff, and 6.187ff.

³³ STOCKER, 219.

Juvenal's use of *intrans* produces a nasty joke. Not only are the men entering the cell, but they are also entering her.³⁴ This creates a sense of speed. As soon as a man enters the cell, he and Messalina are engaged in intercourse.

Messalina is so wrapped up in her role as a whore that she fulfils every aspect of her part. Thus she authoritatively demands the money owed to her for her acts. But she does not need it, since she is, as empress, far richer than any of her clients. The fact that she demands her payment, which is a mere pittance, demonstrates just how far she takes her charade. The amount her clients pay is quite humorous, because it is such a tiny sum. Most likely she could make more money if she were to reveal her true identity. These jokes are meant to condemn Messalina even more. The sound of the line contributes to Juvenal's censure of the empress. The repeated 'a' sounds in *blanda intrans atque aera* suggest to me moans of pleasure from Messalina's cell.

Juvenal uses *excipit* because it has several meanings, which are meant to further mock Messalina. The meanings of *excipit* include, 'accept', 'receive', 'take (in a physical sense)', 'take the weight of', 'support', 'take under one's care', 'give shelter to', and 'greet'.³⁵ Clearly, Messalina is doing far more than simply greeting these men or supporting them. She is taking their weight, but in a very different manner from what is usually meant.³⁶

³⁴ For sexual meanings of *intro*, *TLL* VII,2.61.35ff, and cf. Firm. Mat. *Math.* 1.10.10.

³⁵ *OLD* s.v. *excipio* 5a, 5b, 7a, 8a.

³⁶ Generally, *excipio* does not have sexual innuendo, although it is used elsewhere in this way. Cf. *TLL* 5.2.1252ff, and Hor. *Ser.* 2.7.49.

Juvenal's description of Messalina as *blanda*, contains several meanings:

'charming', 'attractive', 'seductive', 'insincere', 'gentle', 'calm', 'pleasant', 'sweet', and 'soft'.³⁷ Some of these meanings are quite apt for Messalina, and Richlin notes that *blanda* is often used of prostitutes.³⁸ However the attributes, gentle, calm, and sweet, are comical, when the subject is considered. Certainly Messalina would appear attractive and seductive, and she is insincere, but she is not very pleasant or sweet.

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This line has tremendous impact. Its brevity and language combine to create the truly grotesque picture of Messalina consuming men at a startling rate. This line emphasises the large number of men whom she services and her desire for more. The men have no names and no specific number is given. She sees no faces and does not count the number, but instead, Messalina is only interested in the next man who enters both her cell and her. The men are not even living breathing human beings to her, but rather they are reduced to *intransis* and *ictus* (126) to her; nothing but the vigorous thrusts of their penises.³⁹

This line is the only one with direct reference to Messalina having sex. It is a one-line sentence, which creates great impact and sense of directness. It is meant to shock and offend.

³⁷ OLD s.v. *blandus* 1a, 3a, 4a, 5a, 6a.

³⁸ RICHLIN, 47; Cf. COURTNEY, 276; Sen 1.c.2,5; Plaut *Cas.* 585; Apul. 98.

³⁹ The lovemaking of these men is forceful, even violent. Cf. OLD s.v. *ictus* 1a, 2a, 2b. Messalina is willing to endure this roughness, and maybe even pain, to satisfy her lust.

The sound of this line lends impact. The repeated ‘u’ and ‘o’ sounds in the line probably simulate the grunts of pleasure from both the men and Messalina. And the repeated ‘c’ sounds bring to mind the noise of slapping flesh. This makes the whole scene much more vivid.

Juvenal’s choice of verb adds to the repulsive scene. Messalina is not just having intercourse with these men; she is consuming them. Among the meanings for *absorbuit* are ‘swallow down’, and ‘devour’.⁴⁰ This illustrates how wanton and insatiate Messalina is. She cannot get enough sex. It also creates the nauseating image of her actually consuming these men.

Juvenal does not describe the scene with too many details. Instead he provides a couple of telling words, and leaves the reader to fill in the rest. Juvenal does not mention any specific acts or positions performed by Messalina. This vagueness leads the reader to wonder if Messalina is performing fellatio, and eating the penis and semen, or if it is her *cunnus* which is absorbing the thrusts and swallowing the semen.⁴¹ More likely, since *ictus* is plural, and in view of the large number of men visiting Messalina’s cell, the empress is not only receiving numerous blows, but is providing oral sex. This is a very grotesque image, which helps to emphasise Messalina’s disgusting nature.

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Juvenal next depicts an absurd scene. The *leno* gives Messalina orders, which should not be the case, when one considers their relative social stations. He views

⁴⁰ OLD s.v. *absorbeo* 1a.

Messalina as one of his girls; *suas puellas*. She most certainly is not. She has much more power than he could ever hope for. However, Messalina is so immersed in her role as a whore that she obeys, reluctantly. But her reluctance is not due to any objection she feels towards taking order from a 'commoner', but rather she has yet to be sexually satisfied. The inclusion of *mox* emphasises this. It seems that no amount of time would be enough for Messalina. The end always comes too soon.

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This line accentuates Messalina's great reluctance to leave. Juvenal has completely turned the situation upside down. Most women would not enjoy being a whore so much that they are sad, even heart-broken, when being sent home. This shows Messalina's disgusting nature. The adjective qualifying Messalina, *tristis* (128), and her cell are at opposite ends of the line, thus representing the distance from her cell Messalina feels when she has to go home.

The reader's attention is first drawn to the line by the repeated 't' sounds in *tristis abito* and *potuit tamen ultima*. And the position of *tristis* at the beginning of the line gives it increased impact. This adds to the absurdity of Messalina's actions. *Tristis* has many meanings which apply to Messalina at this point, but also mock her at the same time: 'depressed', 'gloomy', 'unhappy', 'stern', 'solemn', 'austere', 'unpleasant in appearance', 'wretched', 'repulsive', and 'having an unpleasant taste or smell'.⁴² Considering Messalina's state after a busy night as a whore, it seems unlikely that anyone would view

⁴¹The verb, *absorbeo*, is more often used of fellatio than intercourse. Cf. ADAMS, 140.

her as solemn or austere. These meanings are meant to be humorous, but no doubt she would be wretched and foul smelling. All these meanings combine to create the comical figure of Messalina emerging from the brothel, dishevelled and reeking, yet trying to maintain her imperial air of dignity, despite her great sadness.

Messalina's exit from the brothel is very different from her flight from the imperial palace. She flees from her marriage bed with great speed, and thinks nothing of abandoning her husband (cf. 117), yet she leaves the brothel only with the greatest hesitation.

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Messalina's state after the closing of the brothel is bizarre and revolting. The entire line is dominated by the empress' erection. Her lust is so powerful that it assumes a physical, even masculine, form. Indeed, the words used to describe her erection are most often used exclusively of men.⁴³ This characterises Messalina as aggressive and places her in the predatory role of men in sexual relations. Thus she appears unnatural and even monstrous.

Juvenal employs *vulvae* for Messalina's genitalia, which most likely stems from popular language, and is rarely found in the higher forms of poetry or formal prose.⁴⁴ The part of the genitalia, which Juvenal is referring to, is not entirely clear. In the early

⁴² OLD s.v. *tristis* 1a, 4a, 8a, 8b.

⁴³ Cf. ADAMS, 103. *Rigidus*: Petron. 134.11; Mart. 11.16.5. *Tentigo*: Mart. 7.67.2; Hor. *Ser.* 1.2.118.

⁴⁴ ADAMS, 102.

empire, *vulva* referred to the womb specifically, but it could easily be used to describe the womb, the interior genitalia, or the exterior genitalia.⁴⁵ Juvenal has deliberately selected a coarse and ambiguous word. Messalina's clients, taking into account the squalid condition of her brothel, would have been from the lower levels of society. And Messalina has amply demonstrated herself to have little or no class. Thus, the use of crude word for her genitalia makes sense. And Juvenal may have wanted an ambiguous word, because of the abnormality of the situation.⁴⁶

Rather than being satisfied by her nocturnal activities, Messalina now suffers from even more lust. Now she burns, rather than just being hot: *ardens* picks up on *calidum* (121). But no longer is she simply warm with desire. Her passion has erupted into flames. And just like fire, Messalina's lust is destructive and lethal, and it may be thought to be so powerful that it causes her pain and torment. The sound of the line reinforces this. The repeated 'a' sounds of *adhuc ardens rigidae*, may be meant to imitate Messalina's moans of pain as she languishes under the intense pain of her insatiate lust.

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Messalina is not only still burning with lust when she exits the brothel, but she is also completely exhausted. This is a perversion of nature. Her exhaustion and lack of satisfaction after a busy night at the brothel are disturbing. The sound of the line enhances the scene. The repeated 's' sounds in *lassata viris...satiata recessit* create a

⁴⁵ ADAMS, 103.

⁴⁶ Most scholars state that Juvenal is suggesting that Messalina has a rigid clitoris. But he may intend, with his unusual phrasing, to create an image both grotesque and unnatural. Cf. ADAMS, 103.

hissing or wheezing effect. This could be meant to simulate Messalina's own panting after having had intercourse with so many men. She is as worn out as the ancient *cento* in line 121.

Although the primary sense of *satiata* is 'satisfied', the secondary meaning of 'filled' adds to this scene.⁴⁷ This creates a hideous picture of her as a huge receptacle for semen, which can never be filled.

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This line emphasises the pollution of the empress. Juvenal refers specifically to her body, but he may intend for the reader to assume that this pollution can also be found in her soul. Thus her outward appearance now mirrors her own corrupt nature.

Messalina's cheeks are filthy but there are other parts of her, which are presumably dirtier, much dirtier. In fact most of the words in this line are connected to dirt and filth. This stresses how dirty she is. *Turpis* is a particularly weighted word; it can mean 'physically disgusting', 'offensive to the senses', 'guilty of disgraceful behaviour', and 'obscene'.⁴⁸ Not only does Messalina carry home the physical manifestations of her foul activities, but even her soul is stained.

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Once again, with *foeda* and *odorem* framing the line, the stench and filth of the brothel are everywhere, and quite potent. The juxtaposition of *odorem* and *pulvinar* is very vivid. It is a verbal representation of Messalina's body, and the accompanying

⁴⁷ OLD s.v. *satio* 2a, 3a.

smell, touching the couch as she lies down in bed. And to emphasise the filthiness of the brothel, which is where she became so defiled, *foeda* is juxtaposed with *lupanaris*. The source of the filth is right next to the end result. The placement of *foeda* at the beginning of the line gives the word extra weight. Messalina's pollution is the focus of this line. Once again, though, Juvenal is referring to not only Messalina's outward dirtiness, but also her corrupt nature.

The passage ends where it began, in the bedchamber of the imperial couple. *Pulvinar* looks back to *cubili* (cf. 117). The couch again raises the point that this is not the bed of some simple peasant. This is the bed of the emperor, which is being soiled by the presence of this unclean empress. Her behaviour becomes much more unacceptable.

The reference to the *pulvinar* provides another strong link back to the beginning of the passage. In religious ceremonies, statues of gods were rested upon *pulvinaria*.⁴⁹ The couch in this passage supports a god as well, only it is an actual god, Claudius. This echoes back to the very beginning of the poem, when Juvenal refers to Claudius as *rivales divorum* (115). This is an excellent example of ring structure. Juvenal is reinforcing the shamefulness of Messalina's movements, by reminding the reader of her position in society. And, of course, he is mocking her at the same time.

Juvenal's purpose in including this episode in the sixth satire is clear. Not content to merely describe the faults of nameless women, he dips into Rome's past and selects a

⁴⁸ OLD s.v. *turpis* 1a, 4a, 5a.

⁴⁹ RICHLIN, 48; RUPERTI, 345. Cf. Hor. *Carm.* 1.37.3; Liv. 22.10.9; Tac. *Ann.* 15.23. Although *pulvinaria* is often used to refer to a mortal's bed as well. Cf. OLD s.v. *pulvinar* 1b.

notorious empress to provide a once living model of lust. Juvenal then seeks, through his narrative of one night, no doubt often repeated through the course of Messalina's life, to demonstrate her depravity in as damning a way as possible. He is quite successful in this endeavour. The overall picture is dominated by Messalina's lust. At every chance, Juvenal packs in references to Messalina's uncontrollable desire, but he never encumbers his verse by dwelling on one specific point for too long. Rather the picture of Messalina is composed of several short but telling scenes, of equal length, within the passage: her flight from the palace, the brothel, and her return home. All of it is neatly packaged in one night, but the reader gets the sense that, even though only one night is described, this occurs on a frequent basis.

Juvenal also very successfully, without using names or number, impresses upon the reader the vast number of men, with whom Messalina has had affairs. Again, this is accomplished through clever use of language, rather than using a mountain of details. And by strongly stressing, at various points in the passage, Messalina's position at the top of Roman society and politics, Juvenal proves his point that the excesses of women are not confined to the lower classes. In fact, these vices are present in ladies of high station, even the highest, and are all the more revolting, when they are found at this level of society.

But Juvenal does not reveal the full extend of Messalina's turpitude at the very beginning of the passage. Instead, he skilfully unveils scenes of increasing outrage. Messalina's actions, at first, seem harmless; she steps out into the night for some unknown purpose. But, as the narrative continues, her actions become more suspicious.

Her destination, when it is finally disclosed, is appalling, but Juvenal does not end his parade of disgust there. Inside the brothel, more of Messalina's filthy secrets are exposed. Her conduct and surroundings cause the empress to appear even more disgusting. And Juvenal does not spare Messalina when the brothel closes. She reacts in a most revolting manner. This provides the climax of the passage. The empress' return to her marriage bed, although not as stunning as the previous couple of lines, still contains elements which stir up feelings of revulsion and horror.

Juvenal achieves his goal for this passage in a concise and entertaining manner. He creates situations and scenes which are, at the same time, grotesque, offensive, and humorous. By the end, the reader is swept along, and echoes Juvenal's censure of Messalina.

CHAPTER THREE: JUVENAL 10.329-345

Juvenal's tenth satire discusses the vanity of human wishes. He covers the topics of military glory, public speaking skills, and so on. The final wish he discusses is the desire for a beautiful child. Juvenal argues that beauty creates conflict and chaos in a person's life. The lines containing the story of Messalina's scandalous marriage to Silius occur at the end of this section, and they provide an excellent climax. The previous lines concerning the dangers of beauty are general, and do not include any fully fleshed out stories of specific individuals. Instead, Juvenal rapidly jumps from scene to scene, providing quick glimpses at the ruin which beauty can bring to a person's life. Primarily, he examines the negative effects of beauty upon a male's life, rather than concentrating on women. Juvenal argues that a handsome person is much more likely to be corrupted, or raped, if they possess any chastity. However, the story of Silius is the worst fate which can befall someone. The consul designate's beauty causes him to be executed in the prime of life. Thus, Juvenal ends this section with his lengthiest, and most grisly, example. In addition, Juvenal uses historical figures for his climax, which has a greater impact. His immediately preceding examples of the dangers of beauty are such mythical figures as Hippolytus and Bellerophon. The use of historical figures lends credibility to Juvenal's most incredible story. A Roman example and the temporal proximity of this

historical example lend extra credibility to the story. Juvenal demonstrates that his warnings are relevant to the reader's own life and times.

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The position of *uxor* at the end of line 330 provides impact for the word. This emphasises the fact that the woman whom Juvenal is discussing is already married. This will be important later on when the identity of the woman, who is Messalina, is revealed, along with her audacious plan.¹ By delaying the identity of Messalina, Juvenal creates tension and suspense, which encourages the reader to continue on and solve the riddle, which is answered in line 333.² As the details of her proposed marriage to Silius are revealed, the realisation dawns that Messalina is committing a grave crime, since she is already married. This effect is enhanced by the juxtaposition of *Caesaris* next to *uxor*. Since this is the Emperor's wife, the danger hanging over the head of Silius is dire indeed.

Juvenal invites advice, in order to involve the reader more intimately with Silius' plight. Since the reader ponders the situation, to provide something helpful, and assumes the role of Silius, the passage becomes much more alive. Juvenal, later in the passage, repeats his direct appeal to the reader. Thus, he carefully maintains the connection between Silius and the reader.

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¹ FERGUSON, 274.

² FERGUSON, 274.

In keeping with his theme of beauty's danger, Juvenal carefully accentuates this quality in Silius. The superlative, *formosissimus*, marks the consul-designate as one of the most handsome men in Rome.³ This is the cause of Messalina's obsession with him. Also, Juvenal describes Silius as *optimus*. In one sense, this description is accurate, since it is easy to describe a man, who is blessed with good looks, as fortunate. Juvenal again uses the superlative form of the adjective to stress just how lucky Silius is. This adjective also applies to Silius' political and economic situation. He, at the time of this sordid affair, was consul designate, and was from a noble family. Juvenal is deliberately depicting Silius as a very fortunate young man which makes his doom all the worse. In addition, *optimus*, is ironical, since its various meanings include: 'morally good', 'virtuous', 'brave', 'obliging', 'gracious', 'politically loyal', 'cheerful', 'happy', 'healthy', 'strong', 'in the prime of life', and 'beautiful'.⁴ Some of these meanings can easily be applied to Silius, such as 'beautiful'. However some of these meanings are meant to poke fun at his dire circumstances. No doubt he is no longer happy or cheerful, since his fate has been sealed. And, while he does oblige Messalina's outrageous requests, it is only because, if he doesn't, the empress will have him killed. Thus *optimus* highlights his weakness. And, Silius' own moral goodness contrasts with the illegal nature of the marriage, and with Messalina's complete lack of morals, all of which serves to accentuate the criminality of the sordid affair. Silius, in this current situation, is not very lucky, but rather is condemned to an early death.

³ FERGUSON, 274. Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 11.12.

The organisation of this line is also important to note. The position of *destinat* gives the word impact. This emphasises Messalina's determination to marry Silius, which will certainly lead to their deaths. The two superlative adjectives are balanced around *et* along with *hic* and *idem*.

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Again, Juvenal, by describing him as *gentis patriciae*, is intentionally emphasising that Silius led a life of affluence.⁵ For this is no mere pig farmer, but rather a member of the Roman nobility, whom Messalina has decided to make her husband. Yet even the consul designate's noble rank cannot save him. Thus Juvenal reiterates the poor man's doom. The dangers associated with beauty cannot be escaped, no matter how rich or powerful the victim is. This is the main point to this section of the satire; even great men suffer, if they are handsome. Rank and wealth do not provide protection.

This line proves to be rather surprising. Until this point, Silius' life has only been described as full of success and promise. Then, quite suddenly, there are three words, which starkly contrast with the previous depiction of Silius: *rapitur*, *miser*, and *extinguendus*. The main verb of the line, *rapitur*, provides many applicable meanings. It can mean to 'take away by force', 'rape', 'carry off' (of death and fate), 'seize', and 'impel

⁴ OLD s.v. *bonus* 2a, 2c, 4a, 5a, 10a, 14a, 14b, 16a.

⁵ Silius was actually the member of a plebeian family, and was not a patrician. Cf. FERGUSON, 274. But Juvenal would often use *patricius* in the place of *nobilis*. Cf. COURTNEY, 484, and J. 1.24, 4.102.

forcibly'.⁶ Silius, who was already married when Messalina began to desire him, was forced to divorce his wife. Also, as Juvenal implies later in the passage, Silius is forced to participate in the marriage ceremony, under pain of death. The use of this specific verb places Silius in the position of the woman, and grants Messalina masculine control over him. He is reduced to the role of a woman captured as spoil of war.⁷

The adjective, *miser*, is just as shocking as *rapitur*. It is very strange for a man, who enjoys as many blessings as Silius, to be unhappy. Of course, the reason for his misery becomes only too clear. Yet, *miser* is, at the same time, an accurate description of Silius, since he is doomed to suffer because of his beauty. Juvenal is also playing on the fact that *miser* can refer specifically to the wretched state of a person's social or financial circumstances. And *miser* is used of those who are sick with love, which would normally be very appropriate for a groom on his wedding day. However, since Silius is not marrying out of love, but rather out of fear, this meaning of *miser* becomes ironical. *Miser* can also be applied to someone who appears dead, which foreshadows the consul designate's unavoidable fate.⁸ Silius is not to be pitied for those aspects of his life, at least not yet. But very soon all of his good fortune will be snatched away by Messalina's insane plan.

⁶ OLD s.v. *rapio* 1a, 2a, 4a, 5a, 7a, 9a, 11a.

⁷ FERGUSON, 274.

⁸ For *miser* used of general malaise cf. TLL VIII,1.1100.40ff; of the melancholy cf. 1103.6ff; of death cf. 1103.81ff; of the poor cf. 1104.25ff; of low station cf. 1104.56ff; of love cf. 1103.18ff.

The position at the end of the line of the third surprising word, *extinguendus*, gives it more emphasis. This repeats the hopelessness of Silius' circumstances. He must be killed; there is not other option. The meaning of *extinguendus* complements Messalina's burning passion for the consul designate, since it is often used of quenching fires.

The repeated 'i' sounds and the balance created by the two genitive words on one side of the verb, and two nominative words on the other cause the line to stand out. And the rhythm of the line complements the action occurring in it. The preponderance of dactyls creates a sense of speed, which highlights the rapid approach of Silius' ruin at the hands of Messalina.

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This line has the first direct reference to Messalina, which confirms the identity of the *uxor Caesaris*, which previously was not entirely clear. However, this reference to the wife of Claudius certainly lets the reader know the exact story which Juvenal is relating. Due to its importance, Messalina's name is placed at the beginning of the line, where it has more impact.

Juvenal's use of *oculis* is ambiguous. Most likely the word is meant to go with both *rapitur* and *extinguendus*. Silius is seized by Messalina's eyes and cannot escape from their 'grip'.⁹ But it is not so much his heart which has been captured, but rather Messalina's eyes will carry him off to a grisly execution. Messalina's gaze is lethal, and

is the cause of his imminent death. Passion is able to pass from the eyes of Messalina to those of Silius.¹⁰ Her passion for the consul-designate is manifested in her eyes.

Dudum indicates Messalina's great anticipation of her wedding to Silius. She has been planning this occasion for a long time, having gathered the necessary elements to ensure a 'proper' wedding. It also underlines her determination. It seems that the empress would stop at nothing to achieve her desire. The risk of death might not be enough. This determination places more pressure on Silius. It reduces the chance of escape, and practically sentences him to death. The empress' enthusiasm will surely cause the end of Silius' life.

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Now that Juvenal has revealed the complete story, he begins to embellish his tale with a description, which is meant to mire Silius in even more trouble, and at the same time to damn Messalina. In this line, the reader sees the terrible position, in which the empress has placed Silius. By including *flammeolo* and *genialis*, Juvenal demonstrates that Messalina is planning to have a legal wedding, even though she is still married to Claudius. This requires that the proper elements be present. However, rather than include a lengthy and cumbersome narration of the wedding ceremony, Juvenal economically supplies a few telling details, in order to provide Messalina's intention for a proper marriage. Thus the reader gains a glimpse of the empress' delusion. In her mind

⁹ Cf. Propertius 1.1.1, although, Juvenal gives this image a sombre twist. Silius is not just sick from love, he is quite wretched from the terrible situation, and Messalina's gaze literally kills him.

¹⁰ COURTNEY, 484. Cf. Ov. *Am.* 3.11.48, Propertius 1.1.1.

the marriage she is about to take part in, is legal. But once again, Messalina plays the part of the man, while reducing Silius to the role of the woman. Traditionally, in Roman weddings, the bride went to the groom, while clearly Messalina is awaiting the arrival of Silius, who has been summoned.¹¹

The inclusion of a *genialis* [*lectus*] helps to maintain Juvenal's scene of a proper Roman marriage. The empress forgets no detail. But, perhaps, Juvenal intended the reader to think of some other, more humorous senses, such as, 'connected with good cheer', and 'marked by festivities'. While *genialis* is an excellent word to describe weddings, which are often joyous occasions, for this particular wedding, it is highly ironical. In light of the pain and death awaiting Silius, this event is neither cheerful, nor festive; at least not in the eyes of a rational person. However, *genialis* perfectly sums up the happiness of Messalina, since she is attaining her heart's desire. *Genialis* could also be hinting that Messalina intends to bear children for her new husband, thus endangering Silius all the more.¹²

The coverlet on the marriage bed, which Messalina prepared, is dyed Tyrian purple, the colour of emperors. The use of this colour is appropriate for Messalina, but it is treasonable conduct for Silius, since he does not belong to the imperial family.¹³ The

¹¹ FERGUSON, 274.

¹² RUPERTI, 1070.

¹³ FERGUSON, 274.

Tyrian purple also reminds the reader of the empress's rank and power, and the power of her husband.¹⁴ This underscores the immense danger hanging over the head of Silius.

This line also illustrates Messalina's incredible audacity. She conducts this illegal marriage *palam in hortis*, in the open for all to see. This reinforces the horrible fate waiting for Silius. His only hope was to conceal this unlawful marriage, and pray that the emperor never find out, but either Messalina's delusion is so great that she believes that she is doing nothing wrong, or her desire for new scandalous pursuits has led her to openly flout her husband's authority. The reader's attention is drawn to this chilling phrase by the repeated 'i' sounds of *genialis in hortis*.

There is a small joke to be found in *flammeolo*. The diminutive enhances the sarcastic tone of this line.¹⁵ The affectionate tone of the diminutive stands in stark contrast to the horror of the situation. While such sentiment would be naturally found at most weddings, it is lacking in this marriage due to the depravity and violence of the bride.

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In lines 335 and 336, Juvenal adds punch to his description of the planned marriage, by including some more details. Messalina, like the dutiful wife she pretends to be, has a dowry prepared and waiting for her new husband, in the *antiquo ritu*. Once again, Messalina demands that all the proper elements be present, so that her wedding will be lawful. She even perverts ancient customs for her farce. Unfortunately for Silius,

¹⁴ COURTNEY, 484. Cf. Cat. 64.49.

the venerable ceremony of marriage, when performed properly, requires the help of various people, which further erodes any chance for secrecy.

Messalina's dowry is the large sum of 1 million sesterces. Juvenal may have selected this specific amount because it was the sum a Roman citizen needed in order to belong to the senatorial class. Even though Silius was the consul designate,¹⁶ Juvenal seems to be implying that the young man depended on the empress for entry into the Senate. This dependence would have further emasculated Silius in the eyes of a Roman reader. And Messalina is most likely using the money of Claudius, her legal husband, to fund this unlawful marriage, which makes for a funny situation.

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This line emphasises the number of people at the wedding. Not only is the *auspex* in attendance, in order to fulfil his role, but there are even witnesses, to make certain the marriage is legal.¹⁷ This brings an ever widening group of people into the crime, which increases the chance that one might inform the emperor or at least spread gossip about the marriage, which might eventually reach the emperor. Thus Silius' chance of escape, which was never very good to begin with, is lessened further.

¹⁵ RUDD, 84.

¹⁶ Juvenal fails to mention that Silius was the consul designate. He may have intentionally overlooked this in order to strengthen the implication that Silius depends on Messalina for political success.

¹⁷ Cf. Suet. Claud. 26.

It was the job of the *auspex* to ensure that a wedding had the sanction of the gods.¹⁸ The use of this holy priest for such a blatantly immoral marriage could be viewed as an act of great impiety on the part of Messalina.

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The sentence spans the entire line, and is contained in the line. The most commanding element is the *tu*. Till this line, the passage has mostly relied upon the narration of Juvenal. This sudden and unexpected recourse to direct address jars the reader. Once the shock has worn off, the question remains, who Juvenal is addressing. He could easily be speaking to Silius, since he would want to conceal this marriage more than anyone else. This is a very vivid touch. It is as if Juvenal were at Silius' shoulder, haranguing him for his short-sightedness. Or Juvenal could be speaking to the reader, as in 329. Perhaps he is attempting to involve the reader by asking this rhetorical question, in order to allay the shock of Messalina's boldness. Juvenal would thus place the reader in the position of the doomed Silius, which draws the reader deeper into the story. The reader, by stepping into Silius' shoes, would begin to feel more vividly the hopelessness of the situation. Most likely, Juvenal is putting the question to both Silius and the reader. In this way, he achieves the impact of the address to Silius, and the appeal to the reader.

The question is quite humorous, since obviously Silius would want to keep such a serious crime a secret. The humour lies in the fact that he has no choice. Even though he

¹⁸ DUFF, 351.

knows that marrying the emperor's wife in such an open manner is tantamount to suicide, he has no choice. His wishes are irrelevant.

Instead of just using *secreta*, Juvenal includes *paucis commissa*. This repetition reflects Silius' ardent hopes that their misdeed remains as hidden as possible. For if it cannot be kept utterly secret, then at least involve as few people as necessary. Of course these two details echo back to *palam* of line 334. Messalina wants nothing to do with secrecy.

The rhythm of the line is very spondaic, and thus gives the line a very serious tone. Perhaps the reader is meant to imagine Silius' gloomy reaction, when he realises that he has no hope of keeping this wedding a secret.

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This line contains two short and brutal sentences. The repeated 'n' sounds give the line an animated alliteration. Juvenal also provides a morbid joke, by including the word *legitime*. Clearly, Messalina wants a lawful wedding, which calls for the inclusion of priests and witnesses. Silius' hopes are in vain. He is doomed. This is also funny because no matter how much Messalina wants to get married in a legal fashion, the marriage will never be lawful, since she is already married to Claudius; the accumulation of all proper rituals and guests will never change that fact.

The second sentence is even shorter and more brutal than the first. This short sentence of only three words contains great impact. The scorn in Juvenal's voice can almost be heard. He knows, along with the reader, that no matter what Silius wants, he cannot escape the hangman's noose. What he wants does not matter one bit to Messalina,

and Juvenal expands on the two gloomy choices available to the consul designate in the following two lines. The rhythm of the second sentence provides extra impact. The short syllables create a sense of urgency and speed. Silius had better answer quickly, for he does not have long to live. And the placement of a monosyllable at the end of the line reinforces the jerkiness of the line.

Again, this line is meant to address both Silius, as if Juvenal were advising him, and the reader, who is dragged further into the brief final moments of Silius' life.

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This line provides Silius' first choice in the form of a one-line sentence. Unfortunately it is not a good choice, since it ends with his death. The dactylic rhythm of this line, which stresses speed, mirrors the action; if Silius refuses Messalina, death shall come very quickly indeed.

The use of the verb, *velis*, is quite humorous, since from the very beginning Silius has not had a choice, but he has one now. He can spurn Messalina, at his own peril. Of course death is not a very good option. The gerundive verb in the apodosis of this conditional clause drives this point home. Refusal means instantaneous death. And the shortness of this sentence reinforces this point. This gerundive also recalls the gerundive used in line 332. Both refer to the destruction of Silius' life. And by using the oblique measurement of time, *ante lucernas*, Juvenal creates another link back to line 332. The gerundive, *extinguendus*, is used of extinguishing fires, while the *lucernas* are lit with fire.

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This line provides Silius, and the reader, with the second option. And it includes the first reference to the proposed marriage as a crime. This foreshadows to what end this lengthy option will lead.

At the beginning this line contains repeated 's' sounds, which may be meant to create a sense of ragged breathing emanating from Silius, as he considers the wretched position he is in.

Clearly this so-called second option is similar to the first one. The only difference being that Silius will gain a short respite, if he consents. However, Juvenal carefully informs the reader, by using the contemptuous diminutive, *parvula*, that, while Silius will prolong his life, the extension will be very short.¹⁹

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This line provides a climax to Juvenal's joke. While he says in the previous line that a short delay will be granted, this line emphasises how short the delay will be. The first word, *nota*, gains added stress. Juvenal affirms that knowledge of the crime will soon spread throughout Rome. He reinforces this by using repetition. Not just the city but every person knows. Obviously word of the crime will reach even the notoriously ignorant Claudius eventually.

With this line, Juvenal is also mocking Claudius. It is ridiculous for the most powerful man in Rome to not know of such a crime occurring within his own household, while the rest of Rome is fully aware of it. The separation of *nota* and *aurem* adds to this.

¹⁹ FERGUSON, 274.

The knowledge of the crime remains a distance from Claudius, just as there is distance between the two words.

The use of *aurem* creates vividness, which draws the reader's imagination into the passage. Perhaps an informer is actually touching the emperor's ear as he reveals the terrible crime committed by Messalina and Silius. Or one can imagine the words actually entering Claudius' ear.

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Juvenal continues to mock Claudius' ignorance in this line, by claiming that the emperor will be the very last to know of the scandalous marriage. By using *ultimus*, he reinforces Claudius' amazing ignorance about his own wife and household. When the reader considers the previous line, and how the entire city knew of this marriage, one cannot help but feel contempt for the emperor.²⁰

The rhythm of the line is very dactylic. Perhaps Juvenal intends to approximate the speed at which gossip travels. Thus, even though Claudius will be the very last to hear of the wedding, eventually he will learn of it, and that time is not far off.

Juvenal refers to the union as a disgrace, *dedecus*, which receives added weight from its placement at the beginning of the line. Juvenal may be implying that Silius and Messalina will be punished for their actions, which are an affront to Claudius. And the juxtaposition of *dedecus ille* mirrors the close proximity of this transgression with

²⁰ At the time of the wedding ceremony, Claudius was away in Ostia (cf. Tac. *Ann.* 11.26). Juvenal may have intentionally omitted this detail to further mock Claudius. The emperor seems even more foolish if he was in Rome at the time of the wedding and yet was still unaware of it.

Claudius. Again, Juvenal is heaping scorn on the emperor for not knowing the vile excesses of his wife.

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This line contains an inverted condition, which contributes to the humour of this passage. The apodosis offers a small ray of hope to Silius. Maybe, if he submits fully to Messalina's will, some small chance of escape may present itself. But the protasis brings this hope crashing back to reality. This vividly reflects the reactions of a man placed in a seemingly inescapable situation. Silius almost refuses to accept his imminent doom, and still searches everywhere for help. Ironically, a few extra days of life have become very valuable to Silius, since he knows that he will never reach old age. This is a humorous inversion of the norm. To most other people, a paltry few days of life is not at all a desirable thing. The short time available to Silius is strengthened by the placement of *dierum* at the end of the line.

Juvenal again reinforces the switched positions of Messalina and Silius. The empress, who has no constitutional political power, wields *imperium* over her husband to be, as if she were a magistrate. The source of Messalina's *imperium* is Silius' fear of death. On the other hand, Silius, who will soon possess the highest office of the *cursus honorum*, the consulship, has no power over Messalina.

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Juvenal begins this line by stressing the precious few days remaining in Silius' life, with the placement of *paucorum* at the beginning.

There is great irony in this line. The choices available to Silius are neither *melius* nor *levius*.²¹ The meanings attached to *bonus*, such as ‘fine’, ‘excellent’, ‘desirable’, ‘such as one desires’, ‘satisfactory’, ‘having a desired result’, ‘good’, ‘lucky’, and ‘sound’, are very ironical, since there is no real choice available to Silius.²² The same holds true for *levius*, which can mean, ‘gentle’, ‘slight’, ‘moderate’, ‘slight’, ‘easy to perform’, ‘easy to bear’ (of pain and loss), ‘tolerable’, ‘insignificant’, and ‘intended for amusement’.²³ Clearly the two paths are none of these things.

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Juvenal ends this passage, and the section of the folly of wishing for beauty, with a cutting *sententia*. The inevitable result of beauty is a sword on the neck. The gerundive *praebenda*, which gains added weight at the beginning of the line, makes the reader understand that Silius must die. There is no escape. The verb is often employed for those who meekly resign themselves to their fate.²⁴ Juvenal intends for the story of Silius to act as an example, and warning, against the dangers of beauty. Any handsome man could just as easily end up baring his neck for the executioner.

The two adjectives provide some humour for this otherwise grim line. The neck on the chopping block, which is so handsome and white, will no longer be so pretty, after it is run through with a sword. The white neck provides a vivid colour contrast with the

²¹ The two words are underlined by the repeated ‘e’ and ‘i’ sounds, and by the rhyming.

²² OLD s.v. *bonus* 3a, 9a, 12a, 17a, 17b, 18a.

²³ OLD s.v. *levis*, 5a, 6a, 9a, 10a, 13a, 14a.

blood that soon will be covering it. The adjective *candida* creates humour in the line. Not only does it mark the neck as white, but also its other meanings include, white as the colour of good fortune, 'fair skinned', 'beautiful', 'lucky', 'prosperous', 'happy', 'bright', and 'cheerful'.²⁵ This adjective aids Juvenal's warning against praying for beauty, since it is a handsome neck, which is about to be run through. The use of this adjective is also very ironical, since no one would consider someone, who is about to be executed, to be happy, fortunate, or cheerful. In addition Juvenal could be referring to the paleness of Silius' neck, to emphasise his understandable nervousness, as the sword hangs over him, ready to strike.

The word order contributes to the impact of the line. The juxtaposition of *gladio* and *pulchra* demonstrates how perilously close to death beauty brings a person. And the placement of *cervix* at the end of the line emphasises the ill luck, which accompanies comeliness. For, as Juvenal points out, it is the beautiful necks which meet the executioner's sword. The focus *cervix* receives at the end of the line emphasises the danger. Perhaps the sound, also, adds to the sense of dread in this line. The repeated 'c' sounds could be mimicking the sword hacking through the neck of its victim. The rhythm, marked by spondees, also adds a tone of solemnity to this line.

The inclusion of *haec* brings the reader closer to the action. It creates the sense that Juvenal is attending the execution, and is able to point at the pretty, white neck of Silius, who kneels beside him. This makes for a very vivid picture.

²⁴ FERGUSON, 274.

The section from line 329 to 345 primarily discusses the awful situation into which Silius' beauty has dragged him. However, even though he is the main character of the section, Silius rarely acts. Instead, in order to reflect the consul designate's lack of power, he is the subject of passive verbs, as in lines 332 and 345. In fact the entire passage is littered with passive verbs, which help create a sense of helplessness.²⁶

Messalina's direct role in the section is less than that of Silius. Juvenal describes her as she waits for her groom, from line 333 to line 336, which is the most direct reference to the empress. However, even though the rest of the section focuses on Silius, there is a great deal of indirect characterisation of Messalina. Whenever Juvenal stresses Silius' impotence, he is also commenting upon Messalina's excessive power. The choices available to Silius reflect the determination, and potential violence, of the empress. The details of the wedding demonstrate her madness, and audacity. Messalina has complete control over Silius throughout the section. This section provides the climax to Juvenal's discussion of the dangers of beauty. And while Silius is the main character, since he is the one whose handsome face leads to disaster, Juvenal includes lots of indirect information about Messalina.

Messalina is portrayed by Juvenal as a very undesirable wife and empress. Clearly she does not act as a proper matron should. Juvenal's attention to the details of her planned marriage provides excellent insight into Messalina's paradoxical nature in this passage. She assembles with great care all the required elements for her wedding, as

²⁵ OLD s.v. *candidus* 2a, 4d, 4e, 5a, 7a, 7b.

a virtuous Roman woman should. However, because she is already married, to the emperor no less, her attention to detail becomes comically criminal. Her excitement matches that of a young woman, who is deeply in love with her groom. But again this is subverted by the truth of the situation. Messalina does not seem to be aware of the wicked nature of her actions. This obviousness seems to be fuelled more by her depravity than by madness, since she stalks and captures her prey, Silius, with a methodical cunning.

Juvenal, indirectly, emphasises Messalina's contempt for both Claudius and Silius. The emperor, despite his position and power, does not wield any influence over his own wife. Messalina behaves in any manner she desires. The fact that she prepares a marriage to another man, while still married to Claudius, demonstrates her contempt. And, even though the empress is quite enamoured of Silius, she obviously does not respect his authority either, since she has no compunction about killing him. In addition, Juvenal highlights Messalina's ruthlessness. He illustrates the implicit danger in which Messalina places Silius, not only because of the possibility of Claudius discovering the union, but also because of the more imminent danger of Messalina having Silius executed, if he refuses to comply with the empress. This threat of violence also leads one to believe that perhaps there is not much love between Messalina and Silius. For if Messalina truly loves Silius, most likely she would not put him to death for refusing her. And if Silius were really in love with Messalina, she would not have to threaten him, in

²⁶ Cf. 10.330, 332, 335, 339, 340, 345.

order to gain his consent. It seems that, in this passage, their relationship is built upon lust and fear. Messalina desires Silius because he is handsome, but she does not seem to feel any emotional bond with him. Silius agrees to the marriage because he fears the termination of his life.

Messalina's role in this passage, even though she is not the main character, is very effective. By including few direct references to the empress, and instead concentrating on Silius as he struggles with the perilous situation before him, Juvenal makes Messalina a much more ominous figure. Even though she is not overtly mentioned, Messalina and her promise of death loom over all the action of lines 337 to 345. She seems more menacing to the reader, since she has such a tremendous effect upon Silius, even though she is not immediately present. She remains a sinister force in the background.

Lines 324 to 329, which immediately precede the passage about Silius, briefly mention the troubles of Hippolytus and Bellerophon. Their beauty, just like Silius', caused them hardship or even death. Also, these lines aid the characterisation of Messalina. Juvenal refers to the two women who cause the difficulties for the handsome heroes, Phaedra and Sthenoboea. These mythological women commit acts which are strikingly similar to the crime of Messalina. All three women bear an unnatural amount of lust, which causes them to pursue men, with whom they should not have relations. This pursuit in each case ends in tragedy. While Bellerophon escapes death, the fate of Hippolytus and Silius is identical. The lust and madness of Phaedra and Messalina leads both to their death, and the death of the men they desire. Thus, by association, Messalina ends a long line of errant females, who are furiously angry and extremely savage.

However, Juvenal's treatment of Messalina's affair is much more comprehensive, and effective, since it is a recent historical event, rather than a mythological story.

Juvenal employs Messalina in two distinct ways. In the sixth satire, Juvenal uses the empress as a model to demonstrate the depths of depravity a woman can sink to. Thus, Juvenal concentrates his narrative upon Messalina and her disgusting activities over the course of one night. He includes numerous details, which are meant to condemn Messalina for her uncontrollable lust. In the tenth satire, Juvenal addresses the folly of human wishes. Messalina's role in this satire is not as prominent, but rather she acts as the cause of Silius' doom. She is present in the background, but takes little direct action. Despite her reduced role, Juvenal still manages to paint a clear, and negative, picture of the empress. Her lust, while still present, is not the main focus for this passage. Instead, Juvenal plays upon her power, and her ruthless, violent nature. Juvenal concentrates on specific qualities of the empress, in order to enhance each satire. Of course in each satire she is a criminal, despicable character.

CHAPTER FOUR: TACITUS ANNALS 11.12f., 26-38

ANNALS 11.12-13¹

Tacitus begins his brief introduction to the marriage of Messalina and Silius by mentioning the popularity of Germanicus and his family.² This reference provides good insight into Tacitus' intentions for Messalina. Clearly Germanicus, while still alive, possessed admirable qualities, which garnered him such popularity. Tacitus may intend the reader to contrast Germanicus, who was a paragon of virtue, with the current imperial family, who deserve contempt and scorn. Thus, Tacitus, from the beginning, attempts to turn the reader's feelings against Messalina.

Tacitus continues his attack upon Messalina with clever use of language. In the following lines, Tacitus expands upon the differing circumstances of Messalina and Agrippina, by discussing their relationship. There is chiasmus centred around the verb, *augebatur*. This highlights the differing nouns associated with each woman's name.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the text being used is the Oxford Classical Text by C. D. Fisher.

² The first mention of Messalina in the surviving Annals occurs in the first three chapters of book 11, where she plots against Asiaticus and Poppaea Sabina. From the very beginning Tacitus begins to develop the characterisation of Messalina as cruel, lustful, and very dangerous. Tacitus also begins to focus on Messalina's control over her husband. The description of the trial of Asiaticus illustrates this very well. Her presence at the trial is an arrogant display for a Roman woman, since they were normally not permitted to attend such matters. She compounds her boldness by manipulating the verdict and ensuring that Claudius does not pardon the defendant.

Agrippina is connected with *miseratio*, whereas Messalina is noted for her *saevitiam*. In addition, Agrippina is referred to as *matri*, while, in light of her reckless promiscuity, it is difficult to defend Messalina as a good mother. Of course, Tacitus makes his opinion of the empress very clear by including such details as *semper infesta*. Thus, he describes Messalina as ‘hostile’, ‘warlike’, ‘savage’, and ‘harmful’.³

Tacitus provides a small shock, when he mentions Messalina’s love, which borders on madness. This sudden inclusion of love, especially such a bizarre type of love, into a picture so far dominated by hatred takes the reader on an unexpected turn. This new love is ‘unfamiliar’, ‘strange’, ‘replacing one that formerly existed’, ‘subversive’, and ‘seditious’.⁴ Perhaps it is unfamiliar because Messalina has never before felt love. Or it could be considered strange, since she is already married. It most certainly is seditious.

When Tacitus uses *amor* in connection with Messalina, most likely he means lust,⁵ which tends to be the most notable trait of the empress in the ancient record.⁶ And in keeping with the typical character attributed to her, Messalina abandons everything, even the persecution of Agrippina, in her pursuit of lust. But Tacitus adds another facet to Messalina’s lust. It leads her to madness, *furori*. As Tacitus proceeds with his

³ OLD s.v. *infestus* 1a, 2a, 2b, 3a, 4a, 5a.

⁴ OLD s.v. *novus* 2a, 3a, 8a, 10b, 11a.

⁵ OLD s.v. *amor* 1a, 1b, 7a.

⁶ Cf. Juvenal 6.115-133; Dio 60.8-28.

narrative, he unveils a delusion, which grips Messalina's heart, for she does not seem to be aware of the wicked nature of her deeds.

Tacitus then moves to Messalina's involvement in the life of her new love, Silius. The empress' desire of Silius does not stem from any emotional connection, but rather it seems to come from the fact that he is the most handsome man in Rome. Silius appears to be a new plaything for Messalina. Tacitus uses Silius' former wife, whom Messalina forced him to divorce, to attack the empress. For he describes her as *nobilem feminam*. This means that Junia is 'outstanding by reason of character' and 'shows qualities associated with the well born, noble, and heroic'.⁷ Also, *feminam* can be used of a wife, and its juxtaposition to *matrimonio* emphasises this sense. Messalina should be the embodiment of such traits, since she is from an aristocratic family, and, as the highest ranking woman in the Roman world, should be a model for all other women. But her behaviour, as her assault upon the life of the virtuous Junia demonstrates, is the exact opposite of what is expected of her, which the comparison with Junia highlights.

Tacitus also expands on the feeling of *amor*, which Messalina has for Silius. The empress seems more interested in having control over him than actually falling in love with him.⁸ Silius has no choice other than to yield to her orders. Thus he becomes *vacuo*, which can be used to describe someone as free from emotional entanglements, and

⁷ OLD s.v. *nobilis* 4a, 6a.

⁸ This is enhanced by the verb, *poteretur*, since it is used of those gaining domination over another person; cf. OLD s.v. *potior* 1a, 2a.

free from anxieties or misgivings.⁹ By entering the affair with Messalina, Silius will be enveloped by anxiety, as he attempts to conceal the affair from Claudius. So, *vacuo* takes on an ironic tone. And Tacitus refers to Silius as *adultero* to underscore that Messalina is still married to Claudius. This reaffirms Messalina's depravity, and increases the great danger which Silius is facing.

Next, Tacitus examines the relationship between Messalina and Silius. The consul designate's only hope is to consent to her wishes, and pray that the emperor does not discover their affair. But, Tacitus unfortunately does not seem to have an optimistic view of Silius' chances. He describes them as *non nulla fallendi spe*. Of course this is better than *certo exitio*. But Silius appears doomed.

The section beginning with *sed* marks the start of Tacitus' version of Silius' inner dialogue, when he is confronted with this terrible choice. Tacitus does an excellent job of simulating the thoughts of a real person in such a situation. Silius naturally chooses the course of action that does not result in his immediate death. This insight into his motivations makes Silius more vivid to the reader. But there is some dark humour present in Silius' hope for *solacio* and *frui*. There is little that he will enjoy from his union with Messalina. Instead, it brings him suffering and, ultimately, death. The chiasmus of *operire futura et praesentibus frui* lends extra impact to this phrase, and draws the reader's attention to the humour.¹⁰

⁹ OLD s.v. *vacuus* 7a, 9c, 12a, 12b.

¹⁰ BENARIO, 97.

The final section is the beginning of the end for Silius. Having just noted that his only hope for salvation is secrecy, Tacitus begins to strip this away. Messalina refuses to move about stealthily, *non furtim*, but rather visits Silius frequently, and lavishes gifts upon him. All the details of this section stress the public nature of the affair. When she visits his home, Messalina travels with *multo comitatu*. The frequentative nature of the verb, *ventitare*, coupled with the plurality of *egressibus*, *opes*, *honores*, *servi*, *liberti*, and *paratus* suggest numerous meetings.¹¹ The asyndeton which begins with *multo* and runs to the end of the chapter aids the idea that there were many visits. And finally the imperfect verb, *visebantur*, denotes that this action took place over an extended period of time. Then Tacitus refers to Claudius as *principis*, which contrasts with the reference to Silius as *adulterum*, in the final line to remind the reader that Claudius is emperor, and has to power to terminate Messalina and Silius. This heightens the sense of tension, created by the growing infamy of their affair.

Such flagrant disregard for secrecy eventually dooms the couple. In fact, the reader gets the sense that as time progresses, Messalina becomes more and more audacious. This increase in boldness is a vivid touch by Tacitus. It is only natural, as Messalina meets with no resistance, for her to continue to try to get away with more. Of course, she and Silius take it one step too far with the marriage, which brings about both their deaths.

¹¹ JACOB, 18.

From the very beginning of the relationship, Messalina maintains full control over Silius. Her power as empress, along with her savage nature, allows her to reverse the traditional gender roles. Silius must play the part of the passive woman, while Messalina, as the man, is in charge. The empress' unnatural lust causes her to assume the masculine role. She has the power to have any man she desires so she does not need to passively wait for their attention.

The very beginning of chapter 13, *at Claudius matrimonii sui ignarus*, begins one of the main themes of this chapter, the ignorance of Claudius. As the story advances, Tacitus repeatedly portrays Claudius as laughably unaware of the conduct of his wife and freedmen, despite the outrageousness of their actions.

ANNALS 11.26

Chapter 26 marks the resumption and completion of Tacitus' account of the marriage of Silius and Messalina, and the subsequent reaction of Claudius.¹² It begins with Messalina's boredom. She is no longer content with ordinary affairs. Tacitus strives to refresh the image of Messalina, by reiterating her base nature. He mentions her adulteries in the plural to emphasise the large number. And he uses the imperfect tense of the verb, *profluebat*, to let the reader know that they have been occurring continually over a long period of time. Tacitus also piques interest by noting how Messalina begins to try

¹² The final two sentences of chapter 25 reintroduce two of the main themes of the remaining chapters, Claudius' *inscitia* and Messalina's *flagitia*. Thus Claudius' foolishness is exposed even before Tacitus' full treatment of Messalina's marriage to Silius.

out new, unknown perversions. This foreshadows her marriage to Silius, since it is the result of her lack of interest with most normal affairs.

The surprise of Silius' suggestion of marriage is increased by the inverted *cum* clause in the first sentence. Tacitus provides the detail of Messalina's boredom, and then springs Silius' idea in the *cum* clause. But Tacitus explains to the reader that Silius' plan is fraught with danger. The repetition of *periculum* illustrates the danger of the proposed marriage. And Tacitus notes that some self-destructive madness may lie at the heart of Silius' motivation.

Silius' desperation grows as he scrambles to find some way to protect himself from the emperor's wrath. And so his boldness grows. Not only does he desire to publicly marry the woman already wedded to the emperor, but he also tries to influence Messalina, and begins to abandon his role as the passive partner.

Tacitus has Silius behave in a believable manner for a man in such a desperate position. Silius knows that, with Messalina acting in such a reckless manner, there is little hope of secrecy. Bold action wins out over careful planning.¹³ His mention of others in similar trouble is understandable, for naturally he would seek strength in numbers. Thus Silius is attempting to reassure Messalina. He anticipates any worries the empress may have. He understands, as the reader does, that her power is very important to her, as is suggested by the juxtaposition of Messalina and *potentiam*. Silius is also very aware of the danger, and he may be mentioning it to frighten Messalina, and thus

¹³ *Concilia* contrasts with *audacia*. Cf. FURNEAUX, 39.

cause her to accept his bold plan. The reference to Claudius as *principis* alerts everyone to his power. And he also notes that, while Claudius is oblivious to many things, he is also quick to anger. The asyndeton and the shortness of the clauses in Silius' appeal to Messalina make Silius' plan brisk and emphatic.¹⁴

Silius' reference to marriage answers the question of what audacious action he was planning. Until this point, he had only revealed that he thought it best to abandon the secrecy surrounding their liaison, which created anticipation. Marriage is a very bold move, since Messalina is still married to Claudius.

Despite his carefully prepared and delivered plan, Silius only raises suspicion. However, Messalina's reluctance to agree to Silius' plan is understandable. But Tacitus skilfully includes the detail that it is not the love for her husband which spawns her hesitation, but rather her fear of losing her privileged position. This is very consistent with Tacitus' characterisation of Messalina thus far. The empress is a terrible wife, partly because she cares for no one other than herself, and for nothing other than her power. Her fear is that once Silius gains the throne, their positions will be reversed, and she will be reduced to the passive role. To her, this is unacceptable.

Messalina's reaction to, and ultimate acceptance of, Silius' offer give Tacitus even more material with which he can manipulate the character of Messalina. While she does waver, due to her concern about her power, in the end she accepts. It is her lust for infamy that spurs her on. This attitude is very strange, and even perverted. Romans

¹⁴ The synchystic organisation creates a visual balance. Tacitus lines *caelibem* up with *nuptiis*, and

typically were supposed to avoid infamy, while they strove for *fama gloriaque*.

Messalina's pursuit of a very dangerous course of action, because it increases her infamy, is bizarre.

It is quite humorous that Messalina agrees to marry another man, considering what a terrible wife she made for Claudius. Silius would be a fool to expect different behaviour from Messalina, and Tacitus slips this point in with the inclusion of *maritum* and *martrimonii*. These are reminders of Messalina's broken marital vows, and her overall disregard for Rome's moral beliefs.

In the final sentence of chapter 26, Tacitus again displays not only Messalina's completely corrupt nature, but also her rather fragile grip on reality. The actions which Messalina has planned, while Claudius is away, look even more base and vile, when they are contrasted with the actions of Claudius. The emperor is travelling to Ostia, in order to perform a solemn ritual, whereas Messalina is planning her own religious rites, but she is making a mockery of the Roman marriage customs, by fulfilling all of the sacred ceremonies for her blasphemous marriage. This is shocking and appalling. Her reason for observing the proper wedding rites could be because she is so delusional that she believes the marriage is lawful. Or it could be her thirst for infamy that spurs her onto such an audacious ceremony. But again, love does not figure into her motivation.

ANNALS 11.27

orbum up with *adoptando*. The reader can visually see how Silius addresses any concerns Messalina might have. He can get married, because he is single, and he can adopt Britannicus, because he has no children.

Tacitus begins this chapter with an interruption in his narrative. He makes a direct address to the possible disbelief of the reader. This comment upon the implausibility of the entire affair reinforces the outrageousness of the situation.¹⁵ He knows that it is almost unbelievable, and that heightens not only the shock of such conduct, but also the revulsion. The fact that Tacitus feels the need to defend the truthfulness of his narrative demonstrates his disgusted amazement at the whole thing.

Tacitus includes a threat to the couple in the first sentence. Since the entire citizen body is aware of the planned marriage, the news will no doubt eventually reach Claudius, regardless of his famous stupidity. It is only a matter of time till they are caught and punished.

Adding to this threat is Tacitus' reminder of the prominent positions held by those involved. By referring to Silius and Messalina obliquely, rather than by their names, Tacitus calls to mind the power of Claudius, which means that the punishment will be much more dire. In addition, *uxore* is darkly humorous, because it highlights the absurdity of Messalina getting married again, while she is still wedded to the emperor. She is flagrantly breaking her marital vows. And Silius, who as the consul designate will soon hold a position of responsibility in the empire, is not acting in a dependable manner at all.

Tacitus then walks the reader through an abbreviated retelling of the marriage ceremony. Instead of subjecting the reader to a long detailed account, Tacitus skims over

¹⁵ Perhaps Tacitus' use of the rare future passive infinitive, *visum iri*, is meant to mirror the

the process and provides a few details. Since most of his ancient readers would have been well acquainted with the ceremony, Tacitus has the freedom to skip over certain parts and include only those points which aid his purpose. This makes for a much more efficient and biting description. The asyndeton, starting with *audisse*, adds to the sense of speed and brevity surrounding the description. Perhaps Tacitus intends to convey a sense of haste on the bride's and groom's part. They could be attempting to complete the marriage before Claudius' return from Ostia.

Messalina, who never seems to go halfway, has all the proper elements for her wedding. For instance, the verb *convenisse* is often used in formal wedding language.¹⁶ However, these are perverted by the circumstances. The witnesses are party to a fraudulent marriage, and thus are implicated in the crime. The conception of children, especially heirs, was one of the more important aims of Roman marriages.¹⁷ This is reduced to a bitter joke, since Messalina already has a son, who is heir to the throne. For if this new union were to produce any heirs, Britannicus' position and even life might be in danger, especially if Silius were to replace Claudius. And the honours given to the gods are misplaced. The empress risks severe consequences from including the gods in such a corrupt marriage.

strangeness of his story. Cf. BENARIO, 128.

¹⁶ LIPSIUS, 1091. It can be used in such phrases as *in matrimonium cum viro convenire*, or *convenire in manum viri*.

¹⁷ Cf. BENARIO, 129. The phrase *suscepiendorum liberorum causa* was a legal formula, which showed the purpose of having children in a marriage.

After all the proper rituals are completed, the two conspirators enjoy a jovial dinner. Tacitus increases the repugnance of their actions, beginning with *discubitum*, as they move from reclining for dinner together to having sex in their marriage bed. The exchange of *oscula* mocks them with its sense of affection. Such an affectionate word used of a depraved woman is jarring and humorous. And, by referring to their night of passion as *licentia coniugali*, Tacitus is again mocking them.¹⁸ For their passion is the opposite of marital sex. They are not legally married, despite what they seem to believe. Tacitus is noting that there is no difference between any of their other nights spent together and this one. All the marriage veils and augurs in the world won't change the illegality of their actions. Also, Messalina does not seem to spend such nights with Claudius, her legally married husband.¹⁹

Tacitus ends the chapter in the same manner he began it, with another protest of his veracity, because the story is so incredible. The verbal cues, *miraculi* and *audita*, reflect back to *fabulosum* and *gnara* respectively at the beginning of the chapter.²⁰ In addition, Tacitus' use of the first person and the repetition of *nihil* complete the ring structure of this chapter.

This chapter's primary function is to reinforce the reader's shock and abhorrence over this sordid escapade of Messalina's. Clearly the details of the wedding are quite

¹⁸ The position of *coniugali* at the end of the sentence gives the word extra emphasis (cf. BENARIO, 129).

¹⁹ The phrase *licentia coniugali* could also allude to the marriage of Messalina and Claudius, since she was not monogamous. Their marriage did nothing to deter her numerous affairs.

important for this end. Instead of sticking to a straightforward account, Tacitus includes the wedding story in this brief aside. This is done to prevent monotony. In addition, his attempts to make the reader believe in such a tale are meant to highlight the absurdity of the marriage, rather than to gain actual belief. Since most of his readers would have already been aware of such a scandalous story, Tacitus did not have to worry about acceptance.²¹

TACITUS: ANNALS 11.28

Tacitus resumes his earlier narrative style and begins this chapter with a very memorable phrase, *domus...inhorruerat*.²² Such an image gains instant notice, because of its strangeness. While *domus* refers directly to Claudius' household, it also conjures up the image of his actual house shuddering. Thus the image becomes stunning, and appropriate, in view of Messalina's amazing crime. This forcefully directs the reader's attention back to the narrative. Tacitus then relates the reaction of Claudius' loyal body of freedmen.

The reference to the *potentia* possessed by the freedmen underscores the weakness and pliability of Claudius. The emperor should be the one with power, but, in the eyes of

²⁰ BENARIO, 129.

²¹ Tacitus may have intended for the format of the chapter to increase the reader's disgust. The chapter is one long sentence, which heaps on the incredible details with breathless speed. But the affirmations of authenticity stand apart in short, crisp clauses.

²² Cf. WUILLEUMIER, 30.

Tacitus, due to his infirm mind and doting attitude towards his wife, he does not wield as much influence as he should.

Tacitus holds up Mnester as a specific example which is meant to stand as a model for Messalina's infidelity.²³ This affair was one of her more infamous. The freedmen were able to tolerate such a scandalous relationship, yet they feared the results of her marriage to Silius. Thus Tacitus is making clear the danger of this union. The inclusion of *excidium* illustrates this. Tacitus is very clear about the danger facing these men and Claudius. The danger stems from Silius' rank, which puts him in a good position to replace Claudius.²⁴

The contrast between Claudius and Silius is quite striking. The consul designate has qualities which Claudius was famous for lacking, such as beauty and awareness. Of course these will not help him in the end. And Silius certainly does not act in a proper manner for such a gifted young man. Tacitus even calls him *nobilem*, which refers specifically to the rank and affluence of his family, but it contains other meanings, such as 'good' and 'moral', which emphasise his improper behaviour. He is also said to have *dignitate formae*. Again this word cuts two ways. On one hand, it is accurate, since Silius was supposed to be the most handsome of the Roman youth. But *dignitas* also

²³ Note the juxtaposition of *histrion* and *cubiculum*. The empress would have had relations with Mnester in Claudius' very own bedroom. Thus Claudius looks even more ignorant of his domestic affairs. This foreshadows Claudius' stupidity in several sentences later.

²⁴ BENARIO, 130.

carries meanings such as, ‘worthiness’, ‘excellence’, and ‘dignity’.²⁵ These meanings mock Silius, because he does not act in a very dignified or excellent manner. Rather he is the pawn of a woman at best, and a seditious rebel at worst.

The freedmen’s fear of Messalina is stressed by a couple of literary devices. The sentence *hebetem Claudium et uxori devinctum* contains chiasmus, and there is alliteration in *multasque mortes*. Messalina is a very dangerous figure.²⁶ She brought about the ruin and murder of many, according to Tacitus. The source of her power is Claudius’ stupidity, which allows her to operate freely. However, in a funny paradox, it is precisely the emperor’s pliable nature, which provides their only hope. If Claudius weren’t such a buffoon, they would not be in this predicament in the first place. The reference to Claudius as *imperatoris* helps Tacitus’ portrayal of the emperor as a fool. It serves to contrast what was expected of the emperor, as a man who commands,²⁷ with the carefully constructed picture of Claudius, who commands nobody, and cannot lead an ordered household, let alone an entire empire. Claudius appears an even greater fool in this light.

The legal language used at the end of the chapter, such as *damnatam*, *ream*, *defensio*, and *auditur* echoes back to the second chapter of book 11, in which Asiaticus is

²⁵ OLD s.v. *dignitas* 1a, 2a, 2b, 3a, 4b.

²⁶ But Messalina is not quite the invincible opponent they so fear. In a bit of grim humour, she fails to anticipate the reaction of, in her eyes, lowly freedmen, and this leads to her ultimate downfall.

²⁷ OLD s.v. *imperator* 1a, 1b, 2a, 3a. Even the standard use of *imperator* as a designation of the emperor mocks Claudius, since he lacks, according to Tacitus, many of the desirable qualities of a good emperor.

charged and convicted of various charges, which were trumped up by Messalina. This is a reminder of Messalina's viciousness and her earlier crimes. But slowly the tables are being turned against her, and soon she will find herself in his position of attempting to defend herself. This foreshadows her downfall.

In his explanation of the freedmen's concerns, Tacitus does not mention any feelings of loyalty on the part of the freedmen. Rather, he intimates that they are motivated by self-interest. Their concern stems from the fear that a more competent emperor, who will not be so easily manipulated by them, may replace Claudius, and thus they will lose their power and influence.

TACITUS ANNALS 11.29

After the general reaction of the imperial freedmen in the previous chapter, Tacitus narrows his focus and examines the specific feelings of the three most important freedmen. From the very beginning, these men are portrayed in a negative manner.²⁸ Tacitus notes their earlier involvement in murders. The use of *necem* and *caedis* demonstrate the potential for danger which these men possess. Indeed, the first example of a murder is that of Gaius, Claudius' predecessor. These men are ruthless. And with *flagrantissima*, Tacitus shows how corrupt he believes Claudius' reign was. For criminals, such as these men, to hold so much sway is wrong. And even more, they are former slaves and Greeks. They have no place, in Tacitus' eyes, in the running of the

government. But not only are they involved in the government, their importance seems to be increasing, for Pallas has *flagrantissima gratia*. Tacitus may also be making a joke at Claudius' expense, by using *flagrantissima*, for its meanings include 'burning' with sexual passion.²⁹

Their plan to remove Silius, in view of their great concern in the previous chapter, illustrates their cowardly nature. These are not men of bold action, but rather they operate behind the scenes, in order to avoid any risk of exposing themselves to danger. The idea that their threats would cause any fear in Messalina, who has brought about the murder of men in higher positions, is laughable. She appears to be in complete control, and simply threatening her will not change anything. In fact it most likely would have brought about grave repercussions.

In the next sentence, Tacitus rams home the cowardice of two of the freedmen. The two words *metu desistunt* give the sentence great impact. He then elaborates on their fear. The freedmen emerge looking like complete cowards. The use of the words *perniciem*, *ignaviam*, *cautis*, and *tutius*, drives the point home. And again the reader sees Callistus only concerned with preserving his own power, and not caring at all about Claudius. The emperor's court is full of criminals and cowards.³⁰

²⁸ But the coming conflict between Messalina and the freedmen is not good against evil. Instead, it may be described more accurately as two groups of evil, and neither one cares about the good of the empire. Their only concerns are the fulfilment of their own desires.

²⁹ For sexual connotations of *flagrans*, cf. *TLL* III,1.847.83; III,1.848.ff.

³⁰ Tacitus employs the word, *regiae*, for a specific purpose. His disgust with the behaviour of the emperor and his court, whether it be Claudius or Gaius, causes him to label it a monarchy. Tacitus seems to believe that the emperor has too much power, and this leads to improper ruling. This is the first instance of

The action of Narcissus is different from that of the other two freedmen. The placement of *perstitit* at the beginning of the sentence gives the word emphasis.³¹ This, along with the brevity of the sentence, creates a contrast with the previous sentence, which highlights the cowardice of the other two.³²

The ambush tactics which Narcissus intends to use demonstrate Messalina's power and influence over her doltish husband. If she has any chance to defend herself to him, Narcissus fears that Claudius will submit to her will. This foreshadows Messalina's end, when Narcissus follows through with his plan, and prevents the empress from defending herself. This plan also indicates how dangerous Messalina is. For she has killed before.

Narcissus' plan hinges upon one of Claudius' traditional weaknesses, the influence of women upon him. This makes the emperor look like an even bigger fool, since his concubines, who have no real power, nevertheless exert a great deal of influence. Narcissus' decision to use them may indicate that they have more sway with Claudius than even the freedmen.³³ Additionally, Narcissus is cleverly employing others in case of a violent reaction from Claudius, or any revenge from Messalina. He remains safe in the background, while others stand to absorb any backlash.

regia being used to describe an imperial court. Thus Tacitus' damnation rings even louder; cf. *OLD* s.v. *regia* 3a.

³¹ Cf. BENARIO, 131.

³² Cf. FURNEAUX, 43.

³³ Narcissus' choice to use two women shows how devious he is. He knows that Claudius may not initially accept such an incredible story, but the affirmation, by the second girl, of the first girl's story is

The irony of Claudius' trip to Ostia is that not only does it provide Messalina with the opportunity to perpetrate her marriage, but it also gives Narcissus enough time to formulate a counter.³⁴ Additionally, the fact that Claudius stays in Ostia *longa mora*, mocks the emperor, because it reminds the reader of Claudius' amazing ignorance of his own home's situation. Certainly, if he knew of the danger, he would not be dawdling in Ostia, but rather attempting to regain his throne.

Tacitus adds the detail that Claudius enjoyed the company of the two women, *maxime*. However, his relationship with Messalina does not appear to be as strong. It is interesting to note that, in the extant material of Tacitus, Messalina and Claudius rarely spend much time together. But when they do, the situation is usually dire for someone.

The promise of more power to the two concubines by Narcissus is quite humorous. After all, this whole crisis has been precipitated by a woman with too much power. And it could include an attack upon the nature of women. Tacitus seems to believe that women are greedy, manipulative creatures, who always crave more power. Thus Narcissus ensures the involvement of the two women, by offering them that which they desire most.

TACITUS ANNALS 11.30

In this chapter, the two concubines make their appeal to Claudius. The very first sentence reinforces the dangerous circumstances. Calpurnia does not calmly, or gently,

calculated to make Claudius believe. Thus the story cannot be the ravings of just one girl; she is supported by another, which makes her more believable.

relate the matter to Claudius. There is not enough time to worry about his feelings. Rather she blurts it out in a very direct and forceful manner. She does not simply speak. Tacitus uses the verb *exclamat*. Narcissus may have coached her to act so flustered. The danger seems much grimmer, because she loses her composure and yells. This would impress upon Claudius the danger, and hopefully spur him into quick action. The actual reporting of Messalina's marriage is ridiculously easy.

The two women play their parts to perfection. Again the reader sees Claudius at the mercy of the wiles of women. Their careful staging of this moment is brought out by Cleopatra's role, as she stands close by, simply to provide immediate corroboration of Calpurnia's words of warning. Tacitus, who has carefully depicted Claudius as a buffoon, makes him look as foolish as ever. And when Calpurnia sends for Narcissus, the reader clearly sees who is in control.³⁵ Claudius is as much the servant of these women, as he is of Messalina. Of course, any time that Tacitus points out the great influence women have over the emperor, the tension, surrounding the inevitable confrontation between Messalina and Claudius, builds.

Embedded within Narcissus' plea for forgiveness is an attack upon Messalina's wanton lifestyle. He takes this opportunity to disgrace Messalina. Narcissus' mention of

³⁴ Cf. BENARIO, 131-2.

³⁵ Again, Narcissus distances himself from the front lines of this conflict, in order to protect himself. Since the two girls warned Claudius first, Narcissus disguises his role as the mastermind, and thus protects himself from any repercussions. In addition, his affirmation, which seems to come spontaneously, combined with the two girls', makes their story seem even more plausible to the emperor.

two names is calculated to increase the impact felt by Claudius.³⁶ The names put a human face on the list, which is meant to enrage Claudius. The emperor may even have known one of them, which would have made him even angrier.

Narcissus mentions the items which Silius has usurped, such as slaves, furniture, and the emperor's very house.³⁷ The freedman does this in order to manipulate Claudius, and goad him into action. Naturally, Claudius might want these back, although Narcissus does not consider them important, only Messalina is important. Obviously no one would ever want her back. But Claudius needs to deal with her in one way or another, in order to reassert his right to the throne. Tacitus also includes some humour in the verb, *frueretur*. Silius has not only enjoyed the use of Claudius' possessions, but he has also pleased himself with one very personal item of the emperor's, his wife.³⁸

The direct quotation, which ends the chapter, carries great force, since, for the first three sentences, Tacitus uses indirect speech. The first sentence in the direct quotation is very powerful. Its shortness causes it to stand out. The question is both simple and absurd. It is astounding, and very funny to the reader, that Claudius could be so stupid, that he had no idea of the wedding. How could a husband not know that he was

³⁶ The mention of only two lovers by name creates a bit of humour. Since Messalina was so infamous for the great number of lovers she took on, the mention of only two is a laughably short list. The entire list may be too long to actually list! The list in Tacitus appears even shorter, because there is no connecting word, which links the two names.

³⁷ This list looks back to Tac. *Ann.* 11.12; cf. BENARIO, 132.

³⁸ OLD s.v. *fruo* 4b.

divorced?³⁹ The fact that this question needed to be asked is ridiculous. Even worse, Calpurnia, at the very beginning of the chapter, informed Claudius of the wedding. Perhaps Tacitus intends the reader to think that Claudius is so stupid, that he has become confused already, and needs to be reminded of the danger.⁴⁰

The second sentence humiliates Claudius even further. The entire Roman world is aware of his disordered house, and now he knows it. The three elements forming the Roman world are listed in a tricolon crescendo of power. The populace are listed first, since they are the least important, and they are followed by the Senate, who had more power than most citizens. And Tacitus ends the list with the army, who were the most important part of society to the emperor.⁴¹ No doubt this is meant to mock Claudius. Narcissus exaggerates the situation, for the entire population did not physically see the wedding, but they were all aware of it. The freedman does this to demonstrate the extent of Claudius' shame, and thus enrage him even more.

The final sentence is a warning. This short, direct statement outlines the danger in no uncertain terms. The simplicity of it may be meant to poke fun at the simpleton emperor. Narcissus is forced to use short sentences and small words to make Claudius understand. The statement is also contains a taunt directed against Claudius. Narcissus

³⁹ The *tuum* reinforces his foolishness, by emphasising his intimate involvement.

⁴⁰ And there is an indirect warning in *discidium*. Narcissus is implying that Claudius' divorce from Messalina will lead to his removal from the throne. The primary meaning of *discidium* in this context is divorce, but it also has some more ambiguous meanings, such as 'a violent separation'; cf. *OLD* s.v. *discidium* 1a, 2b.

⁴¹ The will of the legions, especially the Praetorian Guard, had great influence in the fortunes of the emperor. Cf. BENARIO, 132-3.

refers to Silius as *maritus*, yet Claudius is Messalina's lawfully wedded husband, although she does not behave as though this was the case.⁴² But Claudius' ineptitude as a husband has caused him to lose the title of *maritus*, which is passed to another. There is no going back at this point. Messalina can never be Claudius' wife again. And it also intimates that Silius' power comes from his marriage to Messalina. He will hold the city, but she is the real power. Thus, the best way to defeat Silius is to strike at Messalina.⁴³

Narcissus delivers his crafty short speech for two purposes. He seeks to enrage Claudius by pointing out his ignorance with the first question, and by informing him that all of Rome knows of his shame. But Narcissus also seeks to frighten the emperor, by exaggerating the danger. Marriage to Messalina alone does not determine who sits on the throne. But Narcissus makes this seem to be true. The freedman is manipulating Claudius, in order to make him more compliant.

ANNALS 11.31

This chapter begins with Narcissus moving to protect Claudius' power. The summons of the *amicorum* illustrates that the emperor is almost useless. He depends on Narcissus. Claudius takes no useful action, but rather obeys his subordinates.

Tacitus notes that the men whom Narcissus summons are very powerful. Each man Tacitus lists has increased power and importance. *Potissimum* is a general comment

⁴² The placement of *maritum* at the end of the chapter gives it added stress.

⁴³ The abundance of words concerning marriage in this chapter illustrates the main danger. The husband of Messalina gains power comparable to Claudius'. Cf. BENARIO, 132.

upon the authority of these men, and the man in charge of the grain supply was important for keeping the mob on Claudius' side. But the most important person to keep loyal to Claudius was the prefect of the Praetorian Guard. Without the support of the Guard, Claudius would be in dire trouble.

The men summoned provide even more corroboration for Narcissus, as he continues to manipulate the emperor. He wisely chooses some of the most powerful men in Rome. These men have the most to lose if Claudius is deposed, since they would stand a good chance of being replaced by the successor. For this reason, Narcissus feels that he can trust them to support him. Their affirmation also reinforces that everyone in Rome was aware of Messalina's wedding. Tacitus is mocking Claudius for his ignorance.

While Claudius seems unable to formulate any real plan, his counsellors provide the emperor with the course of action he must follow. Once again, the army plays a key role. The asyndeton of the three commands given provides a feeling of confusion and haste.⁴⁴ One can easily imagine the confusion of Claudius, being surrounded by his court, who are shouting all at once. In addition, the asyndeton may emphasise the haste which the men are urging.

The advice of the counsellors shows that they view this marriage as a legitimate threat to Claudius' throne and safety. Thus they impress upon him, quite forcefully, the need to secure the Praetorian Guard's loyalty. The army is so important that they repeat

⁴⁴ Adding to the sense of confusion is Tacitus' use of *circumstrepunt*; cf. *OLD* s.v. *circumstrepo* 1a, 2a. Claudius is surrounded by men, all shouting their advice, which makes it almost unintelligible. In addition, the alliteration of the initial 'c' sounds of *certatim ceteri circumstrepunt* adds to the sense of confusion; cf. BENARIO, 133.

the warning three times.⁴⁵ And although they suggest that Claudius concentrate on protecting his throne, they do not rule out any possibility of vengeance. In fact, they advise Claudius to postpone his revenge, not to abandon it. This means that vengeance is heading Messalina's way. It is only a matter of time.

Tacitus now provides the reader with Claudius' reaction to Narcissus' news. It is not a flattering picture. Tacitus, perhaps in order to demonstrate that he is not biased against Claudius, uses the verb, *constat*, to introduce this sentence. Thus, the reader sees that it is not just Tacitus who thinks so little of Claudius, but other historians agree. This is meant to lend credence to his portrayal of the emperor. The actual appearance and behaviour of Claudius is quite comic. Tacitus stresses that the emperor's questions were repeated. Both *interrogaret* and *esset* are in the imperfect tense, and when combined with the adverb, *identidem*, the verbs create the sense that Claudius was repeating his questions over and over. He certainly does not inspire much confidence. The emperor's terror becomes even funnier, when Tacitus reveals in the following sentences the actions of the dreaded conspirators.

Claudius' questions are ironical, because the power does not seem to have actually changed hands. He clearly still has the loyalty of the Praetorian Guard, as well as other important public servants in Rome. And the question of his own *imperium* is humorous. For Claudius, in Tacitus' work, does not seem to have much power. Instead, it belongs to

⁴⁵ They mention *castra*, *praetorias cohortis*, and *securitati*.

his wives and freedmen. And should a man who is *imperii potens* behave in such a craven manner?

Tacitus then moves to a description of the activity of Messalina's camp. The *at*, which is located at the very beginning of the sentence for emphasis, lets the reader know that Tacitus means to contrast the two groups. Tacitus neatly handles the entire Bacchic ceremony. Instead of an overabundance of details, which might bore the reader, Tacitus instead focuses upon several snapshots. Not only does this keep the reader interested, but it also allows Tacitus to imbue these selected scenes with layered meanings.

The first words applied to Messalina, *non alias solutior luxu*, demonstrate how unprepared she is for the coming storm.⁴⁶ And they also provide the reader with Tacitus' view of one of the empress' main motivations. Her actions, after the wedding, do not possess the political aspirations which Claudius fears. Instead she only seems to care about fulfilling her own desires with extravagance.

Messalina's lack of concern extends to her entire household. While Claudius' counsellors deliberate and offer advice to the emperor, Messalina's supporters engage in frivolous play.⁴⁷ The three references to wine-making may even indicate that they are drunk. Their lack of preparation serves to heighten the danger, which is quickly approaching them. Tacitus inverts the standard order of the imperial household.

⁴⁶ *Solutior* is an apt description of Messalina in this situation, since its meanings include 'relaxed' and 'free from worry'. But it has other meanings which are appropriate for her conduct, such as 'uninhibited' and 'free to act as one pleases'; cf. *OLD* s.v. *solutus* 7a, 11a, 11b.

⁴⁷ But even the play of this unruly bunch perverts the natural order. For they act as though they are sacrificing to the gods. Thus they pervert solemn religious rites for their own corrupt ends.

Normally it was Claudius who was oblivious of the behaviour of his wife. Now Messalina remains in the dark.⁴⁸

In order to contrast the two groups more effectively, Tacitus includes numerous verbal links between them. The chorus surrounding the newlyweds howls in a frenzy, while the counsellors of the emperor surround him, and howl their advice.⁴⁹ Claudius repeatedly asks if he still is the emperor, while Messalina asks what Vettius sees from the top of a tree. Claudius' counsellors recommend vigorous action, which is meant to strengthen their position; Messalina and her followers engage in revelry and are completely unprepared to fend off Claudius.

Both groups seem very foolish. Claudius betrays his own cowardly nature, for the usurpers, who terrify him so much, are nothing more than a bunch of wine-addled sensualists. They have no real concrete plan to assume power, and take no action to support their position. Perhaps this is due to their belief that Claudius, who was always unaware of their misdeeds, would never find out. But even so, their frivolous behaviour does nothing to aid them.

Tacitus also includes some cruel jokes in his description of the Bacchic rites. Silius is bound by ivy, which denotes him as Dionysus. Such a hubristic display, combined with his ambition, is setting him up for quite a fall. Silius is facing almost certain punishment for his actions. The young consul designate's wreath of ivy looks

⁴⁸ Tacitus says that they were acting as if they were mad, *ut...insanientes*. But the truth of the matter is that they are quite mad, especially if they think that they can get away with such conduct. Their madness provides a strong contrast with the thoughtful advice given by the counsellors of Claudius.

forward to the chains, which Silius will be wearing once he is caught by Claudius.⁵⁰

Another darkly humorous element is Silius' tossing of his head. When Claudius is finished with him, it will no longer be attached to his neck!

The image of the storm approaching from Ostia foreshadows the punishment of those involved with the illicit wedding. Tacitus reveals that the retribution will be severe, since the storm is described as *atrocem*. And Tacitus gives this storm extra emphasis by expanding his treatment of it.

ANNALS 11.32

In this chapter, the folly of Silius and Messalina catches up with them. From the very beginning of the chapter, they know, from actual reports not just rumours, that Claudius was aware of the whole thing.⁵¹ Tacitus very specifically differentiates between news and rumour. This is meant to reduce their hope of escape. And he makes it very clear that they will be punished. In order to enhance the terror of the couple, Tacitus adds the detail that Claudius was, finally, moving with haste. We now see their fear from 11.26, *irae properum*, realised. The giant had been awakened. However, the irony is that the real danger does not seem to be Claudius. His manner in the previous chapter was not

⁴⁹ In both instances the same verb is used, *strepo*.

⁵⁰ The verb, *vincio*, is sometimes used to describe someone snared by an emotion, such as love; cf. *OLD* s.v. *vincio* 5b. Silius is trapped by the ivy, just as he is trapped by Messalina's lust for him in the early stages of their affair; cf. Tacitus 11.12.

⁵¹ Note the insertion of *Claudio* between *gnara cuncta*. This verbally depicts Claudius' cognisance of the whole affair.

that of a husband consumed by anger and revenge. Rather, he was a timid man, who was paralysed by fear. His freedman, Narcissus, is the one to be feared.

The action of Silius and Messalina, once the terrible news is revealed, are not very bold or prudent. Unlike the quick movements of Claudius' camp, these two panic, and fail to form a sufficient countermove. Not only do they appear irrational, but Tacitus also makes each of their actions very telling. By fleeing to the gardens of Lucullus, Messalina reminds the reader of her earlier misdeeds. This way, Tacitus anticipates any sympathy that might be felt for the empress, who is now in an unenviable position, and quashes it.

The reaction of Messalina's so-called supporters is also rather funny. The creatures, with which the empress surrounded herself, fail to offer her much support. This demonstrates that the real power lies with Claudius, not his wife. Claudius' 'friends' remain loyal, because they know that he is their best chance to remain influential, even if his throne is in jeopardy. Messalina's followers abandon her in the face of the true authority of Claudius. When one considers Tacitus' poor view of Claudius, this slap in the face of the empress is doubly hard. And the reader sees the power of Claudius at work, as the empress' lackeys are arrested.

Finally, Messalina forms a plan.⁵² And unlike her previous one, it is quite devious. Fully aware of Claudius' weak spirit, she plans to take advantage of it.

Messalina decides to appeal to her husband in a very private and emotional manner. She

⁵² Tacitus again pokes fun at Messalina. The reference to her not having time for a *consilium* is amusing. If she and Silius had planned better, then they would have had much more time. But instead they squandered their opportunity. If she did intend to put Silius on the throne, Messalina's decision to hold a big party is absurd.

does not seek to publicly refute the charges, but will try to manipulate Claudius in three ways: his love for her, his love for their children, and religion. Again, the empress displays her manipulative and corrupt nature. For nothing seems too sacred for Messalina to distort to her own ends. Messalina is very shrewd and careful. By having three manipulations prepared for her husband, she increases her chances for success, should any one of her attempts fail. In this way, Messalina is transformed from an unprepared sensualist to a smart, ruthless manipulator, who seems to be capable of matching Narcissus' stratagems. Her plan, when one considers Claudius' notorious pliability, makes sense, and seems to have a good chance of succeeding. Thus, Tacitus creates suspense around the contest between the empress and the freedman, since they seem to be evenly matched.

Messalina, only now, thinks of Claudius as her *maritus*, because she knows that is her only hope.⁵³ Now she preaches the sanctity of marriage, now she begs her husband to consider their children. The irony is almost sickening. For Messalina happily threw all of what she is now preaching aside, in order to satisfy her lust. But she only shows her contempt for the family, by employing it to save her neck. Similarly, Messalina attempts to employ religion to stay her husband's wrath. Shamelessly, she seeks help from a

⁵³ Messalina and *marito* are separated by many words, which emphasises the enormous gulf that has grown between them.

Vestal Virgin,⁵⁴ despite the fact that she had previously used religious rites for her own twisted ends, such as her marriage to Silius.

Messalina's mode of transport through the streets of Rome gives vivid insight into her terrible predicament at this point.⁵⁵ Since all but three of her companions have abandoned her, she no longer has the luxury of riding on a litter. However, she does find a new litter, a rubbish cart, which suits such a woman perfectly. The filthiness of the cart mirrors her own degenerate life. Gone are the jewels and gold, which have been replaced by garbage. Perhaps, though, Messalina chose the cart in order to make herself more pitiable and pathetic. This would give her a better chance of gaining forgiveness from Claudius. But, while she may be able to sway Claudius, no one else is ready to forgive her. The phrase *nulla cuiusquam misericordia* emphasises this point.

ANNALS 11.33

Tacitus begins this chapter with *trepidabatur*, which sets the tone for the remainder of this chapter, and the beginning of the following chapter.⁵⁶ The lack of a specific subject for this passive verb is noteworthy. The reader does not know what

⁵⁴ It is also very ironic, and comical, that Messalina would seek help from a woman whose religious duty was to remain chaste. And not only was Vibidia a Vestal Virgin, but she was the oldest, and thus she would have had the most authority; cf. FURNEAUX, 47. Her high religious position would have given her pleas on behalf of Messalina extra weight, and thus would have a better chance of influencing Claudius. Also, the alliteration of Vibidia's name and title draws extra attention to her.

⁵⁵ Messalina's haste to meet with her husband may be another facet of her plan. She knows that she must speak with Claudius soon, in case he decides to have her executed without talking to her first. Her entire plan hinges upon her speaking with him, face to face.

⁵⁶ To give *trepidabatur* added stress, Tacitus places it at the very beginning of the chapter.

exactly Claudius' camp is afraid of.⁵⁷ Tacitus may be implying that they fear Messalina, Silius, the loss of the emperor's life, or the entire situation. Perhaps, Tacitus' omission of a subject is meant to suggest all of these things, and the imperfect tense of the verb suggests that they remained afraid for a period of time.

This chapter emphasises the impotence of Claudius as an emperor. Claudius' role in the chapter is minimal. Instead the freedman Narcissus takes the lead. Narcissus' fear of Geta demonstrates that the emperor did not have much control over his subordinates. For if Claudius were at all strong, such a man would not have the freedom to pursue his own fickle desires. This concern leads Narcissus to suggest a highly irregular plan.⁵⁸ But true to form, the freedman accomplishes his goal in a very subtle manner. Narcissus first mentions Claudius' *incolumitatis* as being in grave danger. Thus the freedman plays upon the emperor's fear, and uses it to his advantage. And then, instead of immediately nominating himself for the position, Narcissus mentions *aliquem libertorum*, but no doubt he had himself in mind all along. Then he offers to bear the burden. This is another clear example of Claudius being, rather shamelessly, manipulated by those around him.

Tacitus devotes this entire chapter to Narcissus' growing boldness. The freedman's position at the head of the Praetorian Guard and his demand to ride in the

⁵⁷ While the phrase *a Caesare* may refer to Claudius, more likely it indicates his group of followers, since the verb in the next sentence, *fidebant*, is plural. Thus Claudius, because of his ineffectualness, has been replaced at the fore by others, who are more capable. The *Caesare* could, for even more shock value, refer to Narcissus, who has usurped a great deal of power from the emperor.

⁵⁸ For a freedman to be in charge of the Praetorian Guard is very strange; cf. LIPSIUS, 1118.

imperial litter with men who far outrank him are strange and striking. Due to the outrageousness of the situation, Tacitus spends an entire chapter on it, in order to fully exploit the negative ramifications these have for Claudius, since he is so incompetent that a freedman controls the empire.

The contrast of the end of this chapter and of the previous one is striking.⁵⁹ In both, the main characters end up riding on a litter or cart. However the differences are marked. Messalina is reduced to a cart full of garbage, accompanied by three unnamed allies. Claudius rides in the imperial litter with two men of consular rank, and the powerful freedman, Narcissus, who now has control of the Praetorian Guard. Seemingly, the emperor's camp holds the upper hand, which makes for a very dramatic scene. One can easily picture the two litters riding towards each other, towards their climactic confrontation. A feeling of suspense hangs over the scene, as the still formidable Messalina and Narcissus come closer to the resolution of their conflict.

The chapter ends with Narcissus fully in charge. His demand to be in the imperial litter, and the subsequent fulfillment of his demand, demonstrates that he commands Claudius' camp.⁶⁰ He even has power over Vitellius and Caecina, who would have normally possessed much loftier social and political positions, and not be subject to the

⁵⁹ Contrast the *gestamen* that Claudius rides in with the *vehiculum* of Messalina. Cf. BENARIO, 136.

⁶⁰ The juxtaposition of *poscit adsumiturque* reflects the speed and urgency of both the command and its fulfillment.

orders of an ex-slave.⁶¹ This kind of inversion was typically attributed to the court of Claudius.

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Tacitus again asserts the veracity of his work by citing the concurrence of many other sources. Thus Claudius appears ridiculous, since the reader may be inclined to believe Tacitus' account, which is very damning.

Claudius moves back to the fore, but this is only so that Tacitus can resume his attack upon the emperor's character. The emperor's reaction is appropriate for the character sketch that Tacitus has assembled thus far. The reader sees that Claudius can be both *irae properum*⁶², and *uxori devinctum*.⁶³ But, since the clause concerning his anger is much shorter than the clause about his forgiveness, Tacitus may intend the reader to think that Claudius is dwelling on the good times more than the bad ones.⁶⁴ While Narcissus' efforts have been completely successful up to this point, this proves to be a serious threat to his carefully formed plan. At this point, Tacitus is raising the tension. The freedman's plan is a good one. His knowledge of Claudius' quick temper allows

⁶¹ OCD s.v. Vitellius, Lucius. For C. Caecina cf. BENARIO, 136.

⁶² Tac. Ann. 11.26.

⁶³ Tac. Ann. 11.28.

⁶⁴ Additionally, Claudius never stops thinking about Messalina as his wife. He refers to her by means of *coniugii*, and *uxoris*, even when he is angry. He still seems to be helpless before her.

Narcissus to manipulate the emperor more effectively. But Tacitus also reminds the reader that Messalina has much power over her dull-witted husband.

Vitellius' words, which are quoted by Tacitus, are ambiguous. Which crime is he referring to? Since the whole situation is so sordid, he could be referring to a number of things: Messalina's vile behavior, Narcissus' command of the Praetorians, or his demand to ride in the litter, or Claudius allowing such leeway to Narcissus. This ambiguity underlines the absurdity of the affair. For the reader, Vitellius' comments are darkly humorous, since everyone is at fault. To cast blame at only one person would be ridiculous. Tacitus accomplishes all of this in a very neat and economical way.

The tension is raised further, when Tacitus mentions the reaction of two supposed allies of Narcissus, Vitellius and Caecina. The freedman's fears from the previous chapter are justified. Narcissus' plan suffers another blow, because he lacks their influential support. These two men seem content not to support fully either side, and thus avoid alienating anyone. The troubles facing Narcissus do an excellent job of leading up to the climax of this chapter, the meeting between Claudius and Messalina. From Tacitus' narrative alone it is not clear who the victor will be. Narcissus and Messalina appear to be evenly matched.

The confrontation between Messalina and Narcissus has three rounds. Messalina or her supporters begin each round, and Narcissus responds. It is important to note that Claudius has no part in the argument. While the empress attempts to draw him in, Narcissus adamantly refuses to allow the emperor's involvement. Claudius' uselessness has never been more apparent. He has no say in his future.

The argument is well crafted by Tacitus. Messalina's appearance and argument contain verbal echoes of chapter 32, in which she first formulated her plan: the *in aspectu* links to *aspici*, *coniunx* links to *marito*, *matrem* links to *patris*, and both of their children's names are included in each chapter. The empress very carefully follows through with her plan. She is quite crafty and methodical and does not appear to be panicking, unlike her husband.

Yet, no matter how cleverly Messalina attempts to manipulate Claudius, Narcissus has an appropriate response.⁶⁵ The empress' reference to herself as *matrem* is meant to remind Claudius of their marital vows, the love they may have once shared as a married couple, and the children she bore for him. But this all backfires. Firstly, Narcissus is able to drown out the empress' words.⁶⁶ And then Narcissus utters two damning words, *Silium* and *nuptias*.⁶⁷ This is aimed at enraging the emperor, and reinforcing Messalina's previous disregard for her marital vows, and her children. In addition, Narcissus prevents another aspect of the empress' plan from coming to fruition, her physical appearance. Again the freedman skillfully intercepts this ploy. The use of a list of Messalina's other

⁶⁵ The frequentative nature of the imperfect verb, *clamitabat*, causes Messalina to appear dismayed and undignified; cf. BENARIO, 137.

⁶⁶ *Obstreperare* is more violent than *clamitabat*; cf. BENARIO, 137.

⁶⁷ The delay of *nuptias* behind *Silium* lends impact to the worst charge against Messalina. Instead of using his best material first, Narcissus mentions the empress' affair with Silius, which is bad enough, but then hammers home his point by mentioning the marriage.

crimes serves two purposes. Not only does it block Claudius' view of the empress⁶⁸, but also it should further anger him. Thus, Narcissus wins the first round.

The second round of the confrontation demonstrates Messalina's determination. At first, her plan to appeal to Claudius' love of their children appears to be successful. The verb, *offerebantur*, is in the indicative, which fools the reader into thinking that the children meet with Claudius. But then, abruptly, the *si* clause quashes that belief and the reader sees that Messalina was thwarted.⁶⁹ The shortness of this round stresses the quickness of the children's removal. Narcissus is fully aware of Claudius' weakness and moves quickly to curtail the emperor's sympathy. Thus Narcissus wins round two. But again, the freedman greatly oversteps his bounds, for he orders about the family of the emperor. As a result, Narcissus appears overly imperious, and Claudius ever timid, since he allows a freedman to order his own family around.

In the third round, Messalina unleashes her final weapon, Vibidia. The placement of the Vestal Virgin's name at the beginning of the sentence gives it added emphasis. She is Messalina's last hope. Again the empress meets with initial success, since Narcissus is unable to send the priestess away, and finally he has to consent to her demands of a chance for Messalina to defend herself. But this success is not too promising upon closer

⁶⁸ This list is also quite humorous, for in light of the number of outrages committed by Messalina, the list must no doubt be very long and thus it could quite easily block Claudius' vision.

⁶⁹ The imperfect, *offerebantur*, is connotative; cf. BENARIO, 137.

inspection.⁷⁰ The price of Narcissus' agreement to Vibidia's terms is the removal of the Vestal Virgin.⁷¹ This deprives Messalina of her last ally for the final confrontation with Claudius and Narcissus. And the empress is granted an opportunity to lessen the charges against her, but there is no mention of absolution or forgiveness. Finally, there is no reason to believe Narcissus' assurances. He may only have agreed in order to be rid of the troublesome priestess. There is no guarantee that Messalina will be granted her defence.

Thus Messalina loses this confrontation, but at least gains a small reprieve from punishment. But the imbalance of the confrontation, which unfolds decidedly in Narcissus' favour, gives the reader a hint of the end. Messalina loses because she has to rely upon her marriage, their children, and religion. For, while these may have aided her against Claudius' accusations, the empress was facing Narcissus, who, sharing no emotional bond with her, is able to turn her own arguments against her, without feeling mercy in his heart.

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Tacitus begins the chapter with the word, *mirum*. This position gives the word extra stress. Claudius' silence during these tumultuous events is astonishing. It is not the

⁷⁰ In fact the plea of Vibidia that Messalina not be condemned without a chance to defend herself foreshadows the end of the empress. Narcissus sends an armed guard without even telling Claudius.

⁷¹ Narcissus' betrays his contempt for Vibidia by calling her *virgo* and telling her *sacra capesseret*. He views her as a meddling priestess, who does not understand the situation. This contempt leaves

typical reaction one would expect from a husband who has endured so much embarrassment at the hands of his wife. And the series of events, which begins with Messalina's initial involvement with Silius, is amazing from start to finish. The behavior of all those involved, not just Claudius, can scarcely be believed.

The short, blunt sentence following the reaction of Claudius and Vitellius also demonstrates the absurdity of the times. For leadership to come from a freedman, while the emperor and men of consular rank remain idle, is ridiculous. The brevity of the sentence lends force to its message.⁷²

Through his examination of Silius' home, Tacitus may be providing insight into Silius' character and future. The enmity which the state feels towards Silius' father reflects Silius' own conflict. But *abolitam* foreshadows the consul designate's future, death.⁷³ Additionally, Narcissus manipulates Claudius by taking him to Silius' home to show him the emperor's family heirlooms, which Messalina stole and gave to her lover. This provides the emperor with visible evidence of this wife's misdeeds. Narcissus intends for this to anger Claudius. The freedman knows that his best hope of defeating Messalina is to direct the emperor's anger against her. And, unfortunately for Messalina, Narcissus' plan succeeds in arousing Claudius' rage.

Messalina in an even grimmer position, because Narcissus does not seem to give Vibidia's authority much credit, which means that he will likely not fulfil his promise to her.

⁷² Additionally in the following sentence, the juxtaposition of *iubet* and *imperatorem* reinforces the irony of a freedman ordering the emperor about.

⁷³ OLD s.v. *aboleo* 1a, 1b.

Once all of this is revealed to Claudius, he finally reacts in an understandable fashion, just as Narcissus had planned. But even now, burning with rage, Claudius appears to be directing most of his anger towards Silius, since it was his house, which was just visited. And, Narcissus is still leading around the emperor.⁷⁴ Even anger cannot liberate Claudius from his subordinates' manipulation. Thus, despite Narcissus' success in his endeavor to make Claudius angry and hostile, there are still seeds of doubt present that he will be able to resist his wife's charms.

Claudius' speech is brief. Tacitus provides a memorable *sententia* to account for his brevity. But the reader may wonder what is the source of Claudius' *pudor*. For the emperor has many reasons to feel shame. The primary reference is to the conduct of his wife, and his previous inability to put an end to her debauchery. But Tacitus may intend for the reader to consider other reasons for Claudius to feel shame, such as the inordinate control, not only his wife, but also his freedmen, have over him. Or his impotence, when faced with a usurper. His actions at the Praetorian camp show that Claudius relies upon a man of much lower station to protect him. For it is mostly Narcissus' doing that secures the camp's loyalty, since he summoned the men and spoke to them before Claudius. Ironically, although Narcissus is carrying out his duties as Praetorian prefect, these duties should never have been his, since he held such a low station.

⁷⁴ Claudius' speech before the Praetorian Guard demonstrates his dependence upon Narcissus, since the freedman, again overstepping his normal authority, speaks for the emperor first.

The reaction of the Praetorian soldiers shows that Claudius, through Narcissus, retains control of the most important element of authority, the army.⁷⁵ And their demand for vengeance contrasts sharply with Claudius' own manner. They move quickly to action, while he dithers and remains mired in indecision. And the reference to those involved as *reorum*, is ironical, since, as Tacitus relates later, they do not receive a standard trial, but rather are abandoned to the mercy of Claudius and his court. This is a definite disadvantage for these defendants.

From Messalina's camp, Silius is produced first. Narcissus may have wanted the consul designate to be first, while Claudius' rage was still burning white-hot. This would help to ensure that Claudius would not take pity on him. The death of Silius comes with ruthless speed.⁷⁶ This man, whom Claudius feared so much, is dispatched with laughable ease. Claudius looks foolish and cowardly, since he feared Silius at all. And Silius' dignified acceptance of death contrasts with Claudius' own craven nature. One wonders how Claudius might behave were their situations reversed. Thus Tacitus, at the last minute, redeems Silius' character, in order to accentuate the cowardice of those still living, namely Claudius and Messalina.

Tacitus next mentions that a number of Roman Equestrians met their fate with similar acceptance. As with Silius, the *equites* differ a great deal from the imperial couple. Tacitus refers to them as *inlustres*, which marks them as being illustrious and

⁷⁵ The repeated 'c' sounds of *continuus dehinc cohortium clamor* may be meant to echo the clashing of the soldiers' arms, or their voices.

⁷⁶ The sense of speed is aided by the lack of a conjunction between *non defensionem non moras*.

distinguished.⁷⁷ These meanings cannot apply to Messalina and Claudius. Again Tacitus reveals their true nature by contrasting the two with those who are superior to them, although men who are associated with Messalina's corruption cannot really be considered completely free from stain. However in comparison with Messalina and Claudius, even the lower elements of Roman society would seem grand.

Tacitus next moves from a group of nameless *equites* to a list of four men, which is then immediately followed by a second list of three men. These two lists increase the vividness of the trials, since the name marks each man as an individual. Also the names cause the lists to appear longer, which creates the idea that the number of men involved with Messalina was great indeed. Of course, an extended number of men also reflect poorly upon Claudius, since he is the one responsible for their deaths.⁷⁸ Coupled with the previous reference to the *equites* as *inlustres*, this list makes Claudius appear bloodthirsty, and indiscriminate.⁷⁹

The first list contains a particularly black joke. The reference to Titius Proculus as the *custos* of Messalina is sarcastic. It was the duty of the *custos* to keep a Roman woman from associating with men other than her husband. One can laugh at Titius' astounding failure to keep extramarital lovers away from Messalina. And it is humorous

⁷⁷ OLD s.v. *illustris* 3a.

⁷⁸ It must be noted that it is not clear who orders the death of these men, for the verb, *iubet*, does not have a specific subject. It most likely refers to either Claudius or Narcissus. Again Claudius may not be fully in charge, and Narcissus may be overstepping his authority. However, Claudius has the power to veto any order made by the freedman, so either way he bears some of the guilt.

⁷⁹ One may even think that his paranoia runs so deep that he was removing anyone that might be a possible rival, just as Silius was.

that Silius seeks to protect the empress, as if he were actually her husband, not her adulterous lover. And it is also ironic to note that if Messalina had had a proper *custos* before she met Silius, then they would not currently be married, and he would have been unable to appoint Titius.

The second list is carefully organised to provide the maximum shock to the reader. Each name is followed immediately by that man's official position. This delay causes greater impact. And the lack of conjunctions moves the list along with even greater speed. Thus the reader comes upon the surprise of their positions even quicker. Initially the second list is startling, as the reader is introduced to some of the more important members of Silius' plot, but under closer scrutiny it appears the Silius did not choose the most powerful allies available. Their plot does not seem very developed or far-reaching. These men that Silius and Messalina have recruited for their cause are not as acute choices as Narcissus', if their intention is to capture the throne; Juncus Vergilianus is just a senator, with no other responsibilities or powers! Narcissus knows that the loyalty of the army is very important for controlling the throne.

ANNALS 11.36

This chapter begins with a lengthy examination of the trial of Mnester. As usual, Tacitus' purpose is to condemn both Claudius and Messalina. The emperor emerges from the testimony of Mnester appearing as his usual oblivious self, having commanded the

actor to obey Messalina's commands, and thus sanctioning their adultery.⁸⁰ And Messalina's character is blackened for seeking an adulterous union with an actor. Mnester also exposes Messalina's cruel side, when he reveals the marks left by the numerous whippings applied by the empress.⁸¹ Mnester's actions also heighten the dignity of Silius' acceptance of his fate.

Tacitus includes the pathetic display of Mnester, on one hand to provide some laughs at the expense of the terrified actor, but on the other to warn the reader of Claudius' pliant nature. Even though the emperor is firmly in control, and has dealt with his enemies, Mnester serves as a reminder that Claudius can easily be swayed by those who are more clever than he is. Since Messalina still has not been dealt with permanently, there is a chance that she may be able to beguile Claudius into forgiving her. And Claudius' desire to pardon Mnester shows that there is a chance that this may happen.

Unfortunately for Mnester, Narcissus is present, and overturns the emperor's decision, even though the actor makes a good case in his defence. For Mnester to be punished by Claudius, after the emperor placed him into such a perilous situation, would be the height of hypocrisy. And his point that Silius would have killed him, if the consul designate had become emperor, demonstrates that Mnester was not a part of any

⁸⁰ The adjective *obnoxium* has the primary sense of obligation, but it also accents the danger Messalina presents to Mnester, as Tacitus explains later in the sentence. *Obnoxius* can refer to one exposed to danger or subject to harm; cf. *OLD* s.v. *obnoxius* 3a, 4a.

⁸¹ Tacitus implies that there was more than one beating by putting both *notas* and *verberum* in the plural.

conspiracy to place Silius on the throne. However, the freedmen counter Mnester's arguments with their own. But theirs do not, in my eyes, justify the execution of the actor. Regardless of the execution of 'better' men, Mnester's case should have been judged on its own merits. And the idea that the crime was so great that compulsion was not a defence is unjust. Tacitus portrays the freedmen as bloodthirsty and unmindful of the law.

And no longer does only Narcissus counsel Claudius. The subject of *perpulere* is left till the very end of the main clause, and thus the surprise is multiplied. For in the beginning Narcissus alone worked to preserve Claudius, but now it would seem that more freedmen have jumped on the winning side. Tacitus is attacking them for their cowardice, for these same men had refused to get directly involved earlier. Only now, when Narcissus has almost completely settled the matter, do they find the courage to make their voices heard. Of course, as low as these freedmen are, they still give orders to Claudius.⁸²

Next Tacitus mentions Traulus Montanus. This temperate youth is the antithesis of all involved in this sordid affair. His two qualities, mild youth and good looks, which are arranged in chiasmus, certainly do not belong to Claudius, and nobody else, including the emperor, his wife, or the freedmen, behaves with any restraint.⁸³ Tacitus is unmasking the cruelty of Claudius' reign, since good men such as Traulus and even

⁸² Again, Tacitus contrasts the executioners with their victims; the dead are referred to as *inlustribus*. It is wrong for such contemptible men to pass judgement on men with the quality of *inlustres*.

Mnester are killed with excessive severity. Even worse, the final two men mentioned are granted that which Mnester and Traulus could not obtain, a pardon. But these men are not very reputable.⁸⁴ The mercy shown to these two men is soured by the reason for the pardons: one man is released because of his family connections, and the other because he was a homosexual and not a lover of Messalina. What would Mnester have thought of these reasons? Again the corruption of Claudius' reign is at fault; innocent men are killed, while degenerates go free. Tacitus ends the chapter with a *sententia* which is very memorable because of its absurdity.

TACITUS 11.37

The previous chapter ends with two pardons. Tacitus is preparing the way for the final struggle between Narcissus and Messalina, even though they do not confront each other in person. Tacitus attempts to heighten the drama of the situation, by building up Messalina, so that she remains a formidable foe in the eyes of the reader. Thus, the previous pardons show that the members of Messalina's camp have some hope of escaping punishment. And if a complete degenerate, such as Suillius Caesoninus, is able to avoid death, then surely Messalina bears no small chance of forgiveness. Chapter 37

⁸³ Messalina takes the brunt of Tacitus' indignation. While Claudius and his freedmen are attacked indirectly through comparison with Traulus, Messalina's disgusting behaviour is mentioned directly.

⁸⁴ These last three figures form a crescendo of disgust. Traulus has good qualities, while Plautius Lateranus is a neutral figure; Tacitus does not mention any of his characteristics, good or bad. But Caesoninus provides a fitting climax, for his role at parties is very disgusting.

also bears the same theme of Claudius' fickle nature as the previous chapter. For Claudius' earlier anger begins to cool off and he seems to be contemplating forgiveness.

Tacitus uses the opening scene to provide insight into Messalina's character.⁸⁵

The juxtaposition of Messalina with *Lucullianis* urges the reader to remember one of Messalina's earlier crimes: her manoeuvring to have Valerius Asiaticus killed, so that she might own the gardens of Lucullus for herself. Messalina is, in the eyes of Tacitus, a scheming and manipulative viper, who thinks nothing of stepping upon those whom she views as an obstacle. Tacitus may include this to prevent the reader from feeling any sympathy for the empress, as she fights to keep the executioner's blade from her neck. Additionally, the tone of Messalina's defence may be meant to increase the reader's outrage. When one considers her desperate situation, her indignant stance becomes distasteful. For her crimes are so many and so great that she should be grovelling for forgiveness, not haughtily defending herself. Messalina plots till the very end of her life. She is too craven to accept her death with dignity, and she is too arrogant to admit defeat.

This juxtaposition also suggests to the reader that Messalina, who was very dangerous when she had the favour of the emperor, still possesses some of her former lethality.⁸⁶ Tacitus again reveals some of her earlier vigour and confidence with the

⁸⁵ The asyndeton of *prolatare* and *componere* provides a vivid touch. The sense of haste may be meant to mirror Messalina's desperation, as she rushes about, while attempting to formulate a plan to save her.

⁸⁶ Tacitus implies with the phrase *in accusatorem*, that Narcissus, not Claudius, would suffer the most, if Messalina were to prevail. Since Narcissus is the author of her troubles, and since she needs Claudius as her source of power, the freedman would be the one punished. Claudius is not a threat to the empress. This also provides insight into Narcissus' motivation. He is not acting to save the emperor's throne, but rather to save his own neck.

phrase, *non nulla spe et aliquando ira*. Instead of relying on pity or humble apologies, she goes on the offensive. Messalina believes that she can regain control of the situation. She does not plan a passive defence, which would depend entirely upon Claudius' forgiveness, but she assumes an aggressive posture.⁸⁷ And even though Tacitus reveals, with the next sentence, the end result in the protasis of the condition, he still builds up the tension. For the indicative verb in the apodasis, indicates that, without a doubt, the action would have occurred, and Messalina would have triumphed.⁸⁸ Messalina has not been completely stripped of her power.

After the brief description of Messalina's scheming, Tacitus moves his lens to the home of the emperor. In keeping with his character, despite the fact that Tacitus has just shown that Messalina is not fully subdued, Claudius treats himself to a feast, and an early one at that; "shock, fear, and anger had not affected his appetite."⁸⁹ As Tacitus has pointed out so often before, Claudius is not in control, and does not even seem aware of the danger Messalina still presents. In the preceding sentence, Tacitus revealed that Messalina was still a threat and that Narcissus alone was responsible for her. As usual, Tacitus portrays Claudius as an oblivious fool.

⁸⁷ Under normal circumstances, her aggressive strategy would seem insane, and Messalina would have no hope of gaining her husband's forgiveness. But Tacitus humorously hints that the real insanity lies in the plausibility of her success. Claudius' reign is so corrupt and ridiculous that the empress has a fair chance at escaping punishment with her aggressive strategy.

⁸⁸ Cf. WOODCOCK, 200.

⁸⁹ BENARIO, 140.

When Tacitus mentions Claudius' decision concerning Messalina, he shows that Claudius is not just foolish, but dangerous, since an audience is exactly what the empress wants. And Tacitus includes several hints, which illustrate why he believed that Messalina would have won, if not for Narcissus, and why the empress has some hope in a hopeless situation. Firstly, Claudius' consumption of wine leaves him feeling hot. This intoxication would have befuddled his decision-making ability, and may have led him to allow his wife a meeting, even though that is very dangerous. And the warmth, which grows in Claudius, may be fuelled by more than just wine. Love and lust may be guiding his decisions now.⁹⁰ If the emperor allows himself to be ruled by these emotions, he most likely would pardon Messalina, since she, despite all that has transpired, commands his heart and libido.

The next hint dropped by Tacitus, regarding Claudius' state of mind, is the reference to Messalina as *miserae*. While *miser* can be used of someone who leads an immoral life, it is also used of people who deserve pity, because of sickness, death, poverty, or meanness.⁹¹ Claudius may be betraying his pity for his wife, now that his initial anger is subsiding. For this reason, Tacitus specifies that *miserae* was used by Claudius and was not the historian's choice. In this way, Tacitus continues to build up the tension. Claudius is coming dangerously close to forgiving Messalina.

⁹⁰ For intoxication cf. TLL VII,2.844.11, and for romantic features cf. TLL VII,2.843.71.

⁹¹ For *miser* used of the sick cf. TLL VIII,1.1102.73ff; of the dead cf. TLL 1103.81ff; of the poor cf. 1104.25ff; of the lowest classes 1104.56ff; of the immoral cf. 1104.74ff. Tacitus most likely wants the reader to view Messalina with the latter meaning in mind.

Unfortunately for Messalina, who never knows how close she comes to avoiding punishment, Narcissus sagely recognises Claudius' softening heart,⁹² and quickly moves to prevent it from ruining all that he has gained.⁹³ Narcissus realises that Messalina's strongest weapon is the sexual control she exerts over her husband. Certainly, in view of Claudius' character, and his feelings in the previous sentences, Narcissus' fear is not unfounded. And this fear impels the freedman to commit his most audacious act yet. He orders the death of Messalina, and he dupes the assassins into thinking that Claudius himself gave the order. Narcissus overturns Claudius' own command of a hearing, and issues his own order in its stead. Thus, Narcissus usurps Claudius' power in order to save it. But Tacitus has implied from the beginning that Narcissus protects Claudius to protect his own elevated status. To a Roman reader, a freedman assuming this much power would have been outrageous.

Almost as audacious, Narcissus places another freedman in charge of the assassins, who are men of superior rank to a freedman in Roman society. It is as though the entire world has been put on its head: a freedman giving orders as if he were emperor, and placing one of his peers in a position of power. Narcissus trusts other freedmen, so he would want one present for the execution, in order to make sure that the job is completed.

⁹² The repeated 'r' sounds of *languescere ira redire amor* draw the reader's attention to these words.

⁹³ Tacitus uses *prorumpit*, which is often used of armies making sudden attacks. Narcissus is not just hastening to act against Messalina, he is going to war.

All of this outlandish behaviour stems from Claudius' inability to rule, or to even control his subordinates. And to complement his condemnation of Claudius, Tacitus includes a joke at the emperor's expense. The role of Euodus as *custos* brings to mind Titius Proculus, who was named Messalina's guardian and was executed in 11.34. First Silius provides the empress with a guardian, and now Narcissus does something similar, only Messalina's new guardian's job is to make sure that she dies. Again, due to Claudius' ineptness, everything becomes inverted, and the husband is not involved with the assigning of a *custos*, which was his customary duty.

Once the assassins reach the gardens, Tacitus provides a vivid picture of Messalina prostrate on the ground. This is humorous, since very soon she will be deep in the ground, in her grave. For Messalina's situation is dire. She has been abandoned by all of her supporters except for one final ally, her mother. And while her mother offers the empress advice, it unfortunately is to commit suicide. Lepida recognises the hopelessness of the situation, and pleads for Messalina to find the dignity in death which she lacked in life. Through her advice, Tacitus contrasts Lepida's stoic acceptance with Messalina's cowardly, and ultimately futile, attempts to prolong her life.⁹⁴ Lepida possesses commendable morals and acts as a Roman matron should, while Messalina is completely devoid of these morals and cannot act in the proper manner. This comparison makes the empress appear even more degenerate.

⁹⁴ Also, when one compares the reactions of Messalina and Silius, her co-conspirator, the empress again appears craven. Silius possesses the dignity of Lepida, and in this way is superior to Messalina.

Another way in which the comparison between mother and daughter damages Messalina is the presence of love. Despite their earlier differences, which Tacitus emphasises,⁹⁵ Lepida comes to her daughter's aid, because she still loves her, even though Messalina was responsible for the death of Lepida's second husband.⁹⁶ Lepida is a source of pathos, since she must witness the execution of her daughter, to whom she appears to still have an emotional bond. Meanwhile, Messalina is so corrupt that she does not once express concern over the wellbeing of anyone other than herself. She does not even mention Silius, of whom she was so enamoured. Tacitus intends for the reader to judge Messalina as too depraved to care about others.⁹⁷ But he also casts her in a more pathetic light in this chapter in order to condemn those who are responsible for her execution. Regardless of Messalina's crimes, Narcissus has ordered the illegal murder of the emperor's wife. Roman readers may have found this utterly unacceptable, since a freedman is acting with such impunity.

When the assassins burst into the garden, Messalina is still consumed with tears of self-pity. The imperfect tense of the verb, *ducebantur*, along with its meaning, gives the sense that the empress' sobbing is protracted.⁹⁸ But, as Tacitus facetiously notes, all the

⁹⁵ *Florenti* is meant to mock the empress. For it is a reminder of her former power and high station, all of which she has lost (cf. *OLD* s.v. *florens* 2a, 2b).

⁹⁶ Dio. 60.14.3.

⁹⁷ The placement of *libidines* between *animo* and *corrupto*, reflects Messalina's own character, lust lies at the heart of her motivation.

⁹⁸ *Duco* in this case most likely means 'prolong, protract or draw out the matter' (cf. *OLD* s.v. *duco* 24a).

energy Messalina expends complaining amounts to naught, since Claudius should be the recipient of her pleas. Lepida does not have the power to save her daughter.

The entrance of the assassins is quite dramatic. The inverted *cum* clause accentuates the violence and suddenness of their attack, and the force they use on the door, *impetu* and *pulsae*, foreshadows the violence which will soon be used against the empress.

The use of the word *libertus* may be meant to remind the reader that a freedman was responsible for Messalina's fall. For, not only is Euodus attacking her, but the *libertus* may also conjure up Narcissus, who was the instigator of her ruin. *Libertus* also exposes how far the empress has fallen. Before, she could have aristocratic men and women put to death, but now she cannot even defend herself from the insults of an ex-slave. Messalina has fallen from the pinnacle of power to a position lower than a slave.

The tribune's silence contrasts with the stream of insults issued by Euodus. This silence makes the tribune, who will deliver the fatal blow, seem menacing, while the freedman lacks dignity and civility. Again Tacitus portrays the freedmen as low and spiteful. The phrase *increpans multis et servilibus probris* reveals the extent of Euodus' attack upon Messalina. One can imagine that the insults of slaves were particularly crude and vulgar. The empress is no longer a figure of power and terror; she is lowly and weak.

The entire chapter is dominated by death, specifically Messalina's. Almost every reference to her contains a word associated with death. Even though she does not die in this chapter, Tacitus states both directly and indirectly that she will die. I feel that he intends with this expansive death scene to fully expose his version of Messalina's

character. For it can be said that a person is their most honest when faced with their own end. And Messalina demonstrates that her corruption is complete. Unlike Silius, at the end she is unable to redeem herself in even the smallest way.

TACITUS 11.38

The arrival of the assassins shatters Messalina's hope for salvation. She now knows that her death is imminent and unavoidable. And Tacitus, at first, offers the brief chance that she might finally do what is right. But that is quickly quashed. The vividness of her fear as she attempts to kill herself is notable. It is easy to picture her moving the blade to the various vital spots, as she steels herself for the killing blow.⁹⁹ But her fear is unconquerable. No longer is Messalina the proud, imperious empress of Rome, but she is reduced to a scared girl. The contrast between Messalina's thoughts of a respectable death with her actual ignoble death causes the empress to appear even more craven and base. By spending more time upon Messalina's attempt at suicide, Tacitus firmly plants the image of an honourable death in the mind of the reader. Thus, when he reveals her ultimate fate, the reader easily makes the comparison, and by means of this, Messalina's cowardice is underlined.

And then, as quick as the fall of an executioner's axe, Messalina is killed. Her death comes in three words, which reflect the abruptness of her end. The delay of the

⁹⁹ The vividness of the image is enhanced further by *trepidationem*. The focus of the scene is Messalina's hands and the steel blade, which they hold. One can imagine the trembling of the hands (OLD s.v. *trepidatio* 2a) and the tip of the sword as it nears her throat. While the main sense of *trepidatio* is

words until the end of the sentence enhances the sudden shock of the blow, both to the reader and to Messalina.¹⁰⁰

The disposal of Messalina's body illustrates the universal contempt for her. The short sentence of only three words makes the dumping of her body seem trivial and unimportant, and reflects the speed with which the body was dumped. This differs completely from her situation, while she was alive. She was important, powerful, and surrounded by underlings. But now only Lepida is with her.

Tacitus accentuates the speed of the murder by noting that Claudius is still dining,¹⁰¹ when the news of Messalina's death is reported to him. And his subordinates commit yet another wrong against him, the concealment of the truth. Quite surprisingly though, Claudius has no reaction to either the death of his wife, or the possible direct violation of his command. And Tacitus devotes quite a bit of time to the emperor's strange muteness.¹⁰² It could stem from the amazing and hectic events of the last few days, which have overwhelmed his dull mind.¹⁰³ Or, perhaps Tacitus intends the reader to think that Claudius approves of the murder, understanding that it was necessary, but he

'fear', Tacitus may have used it instead of *metus* in order to convey this sense of trebling, and thus increase the vividness.

¹⁰⁰ Note the repeated 't' and 'i' sounds of *ictu tribuni transigitur*. They may reflect the suddenness of the strike.

¹⁰¹ Again, just as in the previous chapter, Claudius' appears gluttonous and foolish because of his fixation on dinner and wine. *Epulanti* looks back to *epulis*, and *poculum* looks back to *vino*, both in chapter 37. Tacitus may want us to believe that he is so dense that he cannot give thought to anything other than his stomach.

¹⁰² The phrase *secutis diebus*, and the imperfect tense of *aspiceret*, give the sense that Claudius' silence lasted for a long time.

lacked the courage to go through with it himself. His silence may be a mute approval of Narcissus' action.

Claudius' apparent indifference towards the whole affair makes him appear brutish and unfeeling.¹⁰⁴ Tacitus goes so far as to paint Claudius, with the phrase *ullis denique humani adfectus*, as an inhuman monster that lacks any human emotions. He reinforces the emperor's heartless apathy by repeating *non cum* to introduce the two groups, and with the chiasitic construction centred on *laetantis accusatores* and *filios maerentis*. Claudius' unconcern for his children's mourning provides an appropriate climax, since it is his most callous reaction.

The senate's actions betray its corruption. They spinelessly reward a murderer. The removal of Messalina's statues will not wash from the collective memory such a scandalous story. And the granting of senatorial rank to Narcissus, which would be a great boon for any other freedman, since they were forbidden to join the Senate, is actually a step down for him. He views the senate's decree as a mere pittance, for, during the crisis, he acquired much more impressive power. And his influence over the emperor gives him more authority than any senator. During Claudius' reign, the freedmen were the real power, not the senators, not even the emperor. Tacitus illustrates this by including the reason for Narcissus' arrogance. It did not stem from any sort of traditional political success, such as being twice elected consul, but rather from his surpassing of the

¹⁰³ The asyndeton in *odii gaudii irae tristitiae* creates a rushed and confused feeling.

¹⁰⁴ VESSEY, 400.

other freedmen in power and influence. Narcissus does not think of the senators as his peers. He is only concerned with competing against other freedmen.

Unfortunately, the final clause of the chapter is marred by corruption. Many of the commentators agree that there is no perfectly acceptable emendation to the text.¹⁰⁵ The word *honesta* provides a problem, since grammatically it cannot refer directly to anything in the sentence other than *quaestoria insignia*. But that does not make much sense, since in the eyes of Tacitus and his aristocratic readers, the elevation of a lowly freedman to the senatorial order would not be considered honourable or worthy of respect. Some suggest that in a new sentence *honesta* may refer generally to the severe punishment handed out to Messalina and her followers by Claudius and Narcissus.¹⁰⁶ This makes some sense, since Tacitus with this last sentence could be setting up the next book. Tacitus may be attempting to begin his condemnation of Agrippina the Younger already, before she is even introduced. By describing Messalina's severe punishment as just, and then alluding to worse crimes which Agrippina will commit¹⁰⁷ Tacitus makes the future empress appear much more sinister. But some think that Messalina's punishment was too severe to be considered *honesta*, even by Tacitus.¹⁰⁸ But *honesta* works, if one reads a sense of sarcasm into it. Tacitus may be implying that Narcissus'

¹⁰⁵ BENARIO, 141; FURNEAUX, 53; LIPSIIUS, 1137-8; FROST, 296; JACOB, 49.

¹⁰⁶ FURNEAUX, 53 and JACOB, 49.

¹⁰⁷ Tacitus' description of things arising which are *deterrima* ends this book with a cliff-hanger. After all of his efforts to depict this affair as such a dark period, one has a hard time imagining what could be worse.

¹⁰⁸ FURNEAUX, 53.

actions were anything but honourable, and that, while Messalina deserved to be punished for her misconduct, the involvement of the freedman, as Claudius remained idle, brought shame to Rome.

The final two words of the chapter are especially problematic. The editor of the OCT views *tristitiis multis* as spurious. Some, such as Jacob, keep them and include *simul* between them and view them as an ablative absolute,¹⁰⁹ while others instead use *flagitiis multis* or *flagitiis inultis*. But these readings are based upon inferior manuscripts¹¹⁰ and would provide a weak ending for this book. Certainly the phrase, *tristitiis multis*, falls rather flat as the final image of Book 11. The phrase does little to capture the reader's imagination and it does not evoke strong emotions. Perhaps the final two words are fragments of a longer sentence, the remainder of which has been lost. These two last words are best left to the side.

The treatments of Messalina in Tacitus and Juvenal bear some interesting and significant similarities, and differences. Both authors seem to dislike Messalina and they attribute the same characteristics to her. She is savage, insatiate, violent, lawless, manipulative, and determined. They include several similar themes in their accounts of Messalina's marriage to Silius. One major theme is the ruthlessness and brutality of Messalina. In both Juvenal and Tacitus, Silius' refusal of Messalina's marriage proposal

¹⁰⁹ JACOB, 49.

¹¹⁰ FURNEAUX, 53.

would mean certain death.¹¹¹ Juvenal expands on this danger, in order to further the main theme of the section, the danger of beauty.

Both authors include the theme of Messalina's apparent arrogance and delusion. Messalina wants a proper wedding, with all of the appropriate elements present, such as a wedding veil and an *auspex*.¹¹² She is either too arrogant to admit that her actions are criminal, or she is so self-deluded that she is unaware of the illegal nature of her actions. Certainly this demand for a proper wedding does not mark the empress as especially balanced.

Another theme present in both authors is the ignorance of Claudius, and the exploitation of this by Messalina. Juvenal notes that all of Rome was aware of the scandalous marriage, and that Claudius would be the last to know of it.¹¹³ Tacitus, who plays with this theme a great deal, describes Claudius as *insidiis incautum*, and *hebetem*,¹¹⁴ and even devotes an entire chapter to acknowledging the incredibility of Claudius' ignorance.¹¹⁵ In addition, both authors reiterate Claudius' ignorance by emphasising the very public nature of the wedding ceremony. Juvenal describes the

¹¹¹ Cf. J. 10.332, 345 and Tac. *Ann.* 11.12.

¹¹² J. 336; Tac. *Ann.* 11.27.

¹¹³ J. 10.341-342.

¹¹⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 11.26, 11.28.

¹¹⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 11.27.

ceremony as being held *palam* and says that Messalina wanted to be married *legitime*.¹¹⁶

Tacitus mentions that everyone in Rome was aware of the marriage.¹¹⁷ Not only does the obviousness of the wedding place Silius in even greater danger, it also highlights the ignorance of Claudius, since everyone was aware of his wife's marriage except for him.

Of Juvenal's two treatments of the empress, the one found in the sixth satire, which discusses Messalina's over-active libido, bears only scant resemblance to Tacitus' portrayal of Messalina. This difference most likely arises from the absence of Tacitus' account of Claudius' and Messalina's early years, in which he may have discussed the empress' notorious lifestyle. In the surviving chapters on Messalina, Tacitus does not focus much on the empress' extra-marital affairs, but rather provides a detailed examination of the empress' brief marriage to Silius. Tacitus does hint at Messalina's indiscretions, but he does not directly discuss them outside of the context of her marriage to Silius. Thus the Tacitean account has more in common with Juvenal's Messalina in the tenth satire, in which the marriage is discussed.

Tacitus' account of the marriage is much more exhaustive, because he extends his narrative to the reaction, and the punishment of those involved. This difference stems from the purposes of the authors. Tacitus offers his reader the whole story, since he is a historian. Thus his purpose is to provide a full description of the events which he discusses. Tacitus does colour his narrative to affect the reader's reaction, but he still

¹¹⁶ J. 10.334, 338. Messalina's desire for a proper wedding would have led to a great number of accomplices and thus would have ruined any chance of keeping the wedding a secret.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 11.30.

includes the entire story. Juvenal selectively chooses what will best aid his satire, and omits the rest. In the sixth satire, Juvenal attacks the excesses of women, so he tailors his portrayal of Messalina in order to suit this design. Juvenal chooses Messalina as his climactic model for uncontrolled lust, and accordingly examines one night in her life, which exemplifies this aspect of women. And in the tenth satire, Juvenal probes the vanity of human wishes, and the marriage of Messalina and Silius provides an effective warning against wishing for beauty. But, due to the aim of the tenth satire, Juvenal again only examines one part of Messalina's life.

The major difference between the two authors' accounts of the marriage is the role of Silius. In Tacitus, the idea to get married belongs to Silius, and Messalina is at first hesitant. In Juvenal, Silius is passive and helpless. The marriage is not his idea, but rather is forced upon him by Messalina. Juvenal's version may have been the only one he knew. Or he may have known several versions and selected the one which did the best job of bringing out the futility of human wishes, and particularly the danger of wishing for beauty. Or Juvenal may have put his own slant on the story, and changed things to suit his purpose. For Silius' example to be effective in this satire, Juvenal has to portray him as suffering because of his beauty, and not because of any other reason, such as ambition. As a result of this need Silius has to be submissive, and not the instigator. For, in Tacitus, Silius' ambition, fear, or madness causes him to propose the marriage to the empress.

Another major difference between the two accounts of the marriage is the length. Juvenal's depiction is 16 lines long, while Tacitus' covers 13 chapters. Juvenal pursues a

picture that, while brief, is layered. He picks a significant moment and packs in details, which are carefully selected to increase the vividness and punch of the section. Juvenal's accounts are also constrained by his choice of subject matter. Messalina is not the main focus of his poems. Instead he uses her to make his point within the larger scheme of the satire. Tacitus gives a much longer and more detailed account. Since his main purpose for this section is the recounting of this extraordinary affair, Tacitus has the luxury of exploring and analysing it more thoroughly. Tacitus also has the room to provide the context of the affair: the nefarious scheming of Claudius' court. And this leads him to broaden the object of his attack from Messalina to include Claudius, the freedmen, the Roman elite, and the corruption of traditional Roman values. What at first seems to be a vigorous attack upon the empress, upon closer inspection grows to include every person involved in the scandal.

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