June 2003

A Rhetorical Use of Women in Tacitus' Annales

Jenifer M. Swindle

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua

Part of the Classics Commons, History Commons, and the History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studia Antiqua by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
A Rhetorical Use of Women in Tacitus’ *Annales*

Jenifer M. Swindle

This paper explores Tacitus’ use of women in his *Annales*. Though he speaks negatively of them, he cannot be considered misogynistic. He uses women rhetorically as reflections and extensions of men. Thus, his negative treatment of women can be seen more as a negative treatment of men. Swindle compares six women, and the men to whom they correspond. She discusses Tacitus’ intentions in the various ways he portrays these characters. She further points out that if readers of Tacitus focus their attentions on his female characters, they will be able to understand much of how he feels about their male counterparts.

From his first mention of a woman—a parenthetical insinuation that Livia had a hand in the murder of her grandsons—it is clear that Tacitus’ treatment of women in his *Annales* will not be favorable. If we consider his place in history though, when the ideal Roman woman was “noted for her beauty, fertility, and faithfulness to her husband as well as her ability to run the household,” and for nothing else, Tacitus’ treatment of women is not surprising.¹

It is surprising that Tacitus gives women more space in his work than most ancient historians. In Sallust, for example, the “Sempronia passage” is one of only a few sections that speaks of a

---

woman individually. Scholars have wrangled about why Sallust introduces Sempronia—she does not play any other part in the narrative. One common conjecture, that is pertinent to a discussion of Tacitus, asserts that Sempronia is a type of Catiline. This is probable, even likely. And this rhetorical use of a woman as a type of a man is not found only in Sallust. Tacitus also uses this technique. But along with mere personality sketches, which he uses with minor characters such as Poppaea, Tacitus also develops several of his female characters and makes them more three-dimensional. He never fleshes them out to exist on their own, though. He always ties them closely to a male counterpart, be it a son, a lover, or a husband.

In the Annales, there are six major female characters, who can be split into three categories—mothers, mistresses, and wives. Tacitus’ six major women each play different roles. Livia Drusilla and Julia Agrippina for the most part control, and therefore shape, the characters of their emperor sons, Tiberius and Nero. Livilla and Messalina, on the other hand, hold sway as mistresses—Livilla to Sejanus and Messalina to Silius. Often their actions and demands govern what their lovers do. The last two women influence their men through marriage. Whatever their role, each woman gives the reader some valuable information about the man she influences most.

The Mothers

There is much in common between the two mothers, Livia Drusilla and Julia Agrippina. Both women are dominating; both seek to control their sons; both are inwardly feared but outwardly honored; ultimately, both find redemption in death. From the first moment of their sons’ reigns, Tacitus accentuates the parallels between these two women. The effect is that he also draws attention to the parallels in the regimes of their sons.
Like many Roman elite women before them, [Livia Drusilla and Julia Agrippina] conducted family business and sought to influence any decisions taken by the head of the household in relation to the family and its concerns. However, the head of their household was the emperor and their family was Rome’s ruling dynasty: thus the business of their family now included the running of the state.\(^2\)

For instance, at the death of Augustus, Tiberius is not arrived at Rome, having been recalled from Rhodes. In the interim, Livia bars anyone from entering the house and publishes false reports that the emperor is recovering. Once everything is worked out according to her design, she announces Augustus’ death and Tiberius’ ascension simultaneously.\(^3\) Julia Agrippina does this very same thing. She secures the palace and waits for Nero, so that the two pieces of news, Claudius’ death and Nero’s rise can be announced together.\(^4\) The next similarity comes in the first order of business carried out by the new rulers. The primary action of each emperor—a murder, orchestrated by his mother—sets the precedence for who will be in power during his reign.\(^5\) In both cases, the mother will be the driving force of the empire. As a final similarity, Livia Drusilla and Julia Agrippina both receive the title of Augusta, Livia at the ascension of Augustus, Julia Agrippina at the adoption of Nero, which foreshadows his eventual succession.\(^6\)

Tacitus speaks negatively about not only Livia Drusilla and Julia Agrippina throughout his narrative, he speaks negatively

---

\(^2\) Fischler, 122.


\(^4\) Ibid., 12.68.12–69.3. For further discussion on this topic, see R. Syme, \textit{Tacitus}, (Oxford: Oxford University, 1952), 307ff.

\(^5\) In the case of Livia, it is not explicitly stated that she had anything to do with Agrippa’s death. It is implied, however, by her negative feelings toward him just twelve lines before (1.5.9). Cf. 13.1.2.

\(^6\) Cf. Tac. \textit{Annales} 1.8.4–5 and 12.26.4.
about their sons as well. He presents each action of Livia and Tiberius as masks of their real characters. For instance, he reports that Livia and Tiberius do not attend the funeral of Germanicus and that they can barely contain their glee over his death. Not only that, but he asks, “What happened to the traditional customs? . . . the formal poems of eulogy, the panegyrics?”7 We know from the Tabula Siarensis that Tiberius did compose a poem for Germanicus and that the senate, with the approval of Tiberius, voted him all the honors that they could.8 After recognizing this lie, it becomes difficult to believe many of the slanderous things that Tacitus says about Livia and Tiberius.

Likewise, when Julia Agrippina and Nero are slandered in the Annales, it is difficult to know how much of it is true. With Julia Agrippina, and consequently with Nero, Tacitus’ method is different than it was with Livia and Tiberius. Livia and Tiberius are more complex and developed characters than Julia Agrippina and Tiberius, whose sins are almost all sexual—Julia Agrippina’s seduction of Nero; Nero’s intimate association with a slave, Acte; and later, his assumption of Poppaea, who is described as having “every asset but goodness,” as a mistress.9 These weaknesses are typical of a young, playboy emperor but not of an older woman. And yet, he attributes them to both characters.

Tacitus redeems the natures of his characters in their deaths. Livia Drusilla finds redemption through a mild and somewhat complimentary obituary in which Tacitus states that she was of the “highest nobility,” that Augustus was “fascinated by her beauty,” and that she was a “compliant wife.” He adds that she had a moderating effect on Tiberius.10 Like Livia, Tiberius is praised at his

---

7 Ibid., 3.2.16–18 and 3.5.15–17.
9 Tac. _Annales_ 13.45.7–8.
10 Ibid., 5.1.3–1.14 and 5.3.2–4.
death, though Tacitus seems to praise him begrudgingly. He says that at times, Tiberius’ life and reputation were blameless. He states that, although it was mingled with evil, there was good in him.\textsuperscript{11} It is not glowing tribute, but considering the insults and accusations Tacitus has levied at Tiberius through the entire first hexad, it is more than the reader expects.

Julia Agrippina finds redemption in a different way. Towards the end of her life, her character steeply declines in power, prestige, and, especially, morality. With her violent but noble death, she is able to gain something of her dignity back; “She revealed the nobility of her birth in the manner of her death.”\textsuperscript{12} We cannot be sure of how Nero’s suicide was presented in the missing books. However, it must have had something of a redeeming quality to it. As with Julia Agrippina, the quality of Nero’s life declines at the end. After his mother’s death, he is no longer restrained and begins to revel in effeminate and degrading practices. Not only does he fraternize with actors, he aspires to become one himself. He also plays on the Lyre and sings.\textsuperscript{13} But in the end, he does suffer death at his own hand, and Tacitus might have seen this—that he is man enough to commit suicide—as an improvement over the life he has led.

In their lives, their crimes, and their deaths, we can see that these two women correspond interestingly with the men they dominate. Often their lives reflect the characters and actions of their sons. Tacitus paints the pictures twice—once with mother, once with son—and makes his opinions evident to the reader. He makes his feelings toward these emperors clear through his depictions of their mothers.

\textsuperscript{11} Tac. \textit{Annales} 6.52.14–15.
\textsuperscript{13} See Tac. \textit{Annales} 14.15ff.
The Mistresses

Julia Agrippina, after she loses control of Nero says, “Mothers change their sons less easily than loose women change their lovers.” The two women who prove this supposition most conclusively are Livilla and Messalina. Although these two women both play the role of adulteress and would-be accomplice to murder, Tacitus portrays them differently. Livilla is a simpleton whose will is swallowed up in the will of her lover. Throughout book IV, “Tacitus depicts her as a virtual dupe of Sejanus.” Messalina, on the other hand, is the dominating figure in her relationship with Silius. Livilla and Messalina have different jobs to fulfill in the narrative of Tacitus’ Annales. Livilla’s character establishes a precedent for all succeeding revolutions. Forever after this, the only way that the princeps will be in danger is if someone from inside the palace participates in a conspiracy against him. Messalina’s duty is display how weak the men of the empire have become.

Livilla is an important figure in the Domus Augusta, who “degraded herself and her ancestors and descendants with a small-town adulterer; she sacrificed her honorable, assured position for infamy and hazard.” Sejanus is also an important figure in the Domus Augustus (the Domus Augustus is no longer limited to family members). His importance is evidenced by the prominent position—the opening of book IV—of his introduction. Sejanus has a leading position in the government as Tiberius’ right hand man. Tacitus’ purpose with Sejanus, and therefore with his counterpart, Livilla, is not to present him as a formidable threat to the princeps. He tells us at the outset that Tiberius will outclass Sejanus in cunning and that his downfall will be disastrous to Rome. Rather, he

---

14 Ibid., 13.21.8–11.
16 Tac. Annales 4.3.16.
17 Ibid., 4.1.21–22.
uses Sejanus to show that an ordinary person from a small Etrurian town can wreak havoc on a weak empire. There is not real danger, yet, of a small-time leader taking over, but he, like Livilla, sets a precedent. And he could not have become powerful without the help and complicity of his mistress. Livilla’s role in the affair is crucial. And the most important aspect of that role is to establish a standard.

Messalina’s role is crucial to her situation in a much different way. She is the model of the domineering woman. Tiberius was portrayed as a weakling, but he did stand up to his mother occasionally; conversely, Silius is a puppet on Messalina’s hand. He is never in control in their relationship. Tacitus introduces Silius by saying, “She (Messalina) was infatuated with the best-looking young man in Rome, Gaius Silius. Forced by Messalina to divorce his aristocratic wife, Junia Silana.”

Notice that Messalina is the eminent figure in the sentence. Not only is Silius an afterthought in his own introduction, he ends up being an afterthought in his relationship with Messalina as well. Messalina wields almost unlimited influence with him. The only instance of personal thinking Silius exhibits throughout the whole of this insidious relationship is when he induces Messalina, a married woman, to marry him. Even then, he is not what induces Messalina to comply. It is rather the outrageousness of the situation that attracts her. Just before this, Tacitus says that Messalina has been “drifting into boredom” from the ease of the affair. Silius is clearly not the inducement. Nor is their marriage a binding connection once it takes place. At the first hint of trouble, when Claudius returns to Rome, the two separate and are thence on their own.

As with many characters in the Annales, though, Tacitus redeems these two with the opportunity of respectable deaths. Silius is gallant and does not shirk his duty. Tacitus praises his

---

18 Ibid., 11.12.6–9.
19 Ibid., 11.26.1.
bravery by saying, “Certain distinguished knights showed equal courage.” Messalina, however, does not take her chance for redemption. She does not show any bravery in her death. She tries to resort to her old ways of pleading with Claudius, but the freedmen, Claudius’ advisors, prevent it. In the end, she is offered the dagger but does not have the nerve to take it. Instead, she shamefully loses her head. With Messalina and Silius, Tacitus demonstrates that the empire has reached the point where its men are women, and its woman, *virago*. And the effects of this are unmistakable: chaos and, eventually, death.

The Wives

Plancina and Vipsania Agrippina are more reflective of their men than the other four women are. True the mothers and mistresses generate interesting insights into their sons and lovers, but the wives create the most vivid and effective comparison in the book, both between themselves as complete characters, and in what they show about their husbands, Germanicus and Piso. The women, Vipsania Agrippina and Plancina are strikingly different women. Vipsania Agrippina is a moderately respectable Roman matron. Plancina is a contemptible person. The husbands are also very different, and it is through their wives that Tacitus illustrates his opinions of them.

Germanicus and Vipsania Agrippina are the only two major characters that Tacitus paints in a relatively positive light. However, as Mellor points out, they are certainly not the models of traditional Roman ideals, and therein lie some interesting points of comparison. Germanicus is “impractical, romantic,

---

20 Ibid., 11.35.14.
21 Mellor, 76.
emotional, and filled with self-pity.”22 This is clearly demonstrated by his repeated sobbing and lamenting.23 Though he displays a feminine propensity toward weeping, it does not follow that he is effeminate. Perhaps it is because he is such a good soldier otherwise. At one point, Germanicus tells his soldiers, “My wife and son are not more dear to me than my father and my country. I would willingly see my wife and children die for your greater glory.”24 Whatever else may be said about Germanicus, even taking his outbursts into account, he could not be called weak with resolution like that.

Nor can Vipsania Agrippina be referred to as weak. She is a strong, independent woman, and unlike Livilla, she exerts her own will numerous times throughout the narrative. One particular instance stands out: after taking a German rampart, the Roman soldiers hear that German reinforcements are on their way. The men panic and consider tearing down a bridge to stop the Germans from reaching them. Vipsania Agrippina remains calm and placates the terror of the soldiers, when others—men—are unable to calm them. It is true that “military camps were traditionally off-limits to respectable women, regardless of the amount of power they enjoyed.”25 Yet the reader does not get the sense that Tacitus is condemning Germanicus or Vipsania Agrippina for such an action. Rather, he seems to be suggesting that Germanicus is strong and stoic like his wife. True they are unconventional, but they are precisely what their particular situations call for. They get the job done.

Tacitus does make it clear, however, that while unorthodox behavior may be effective, it can be taken too far. A clear example

22 Ibid.
23 For examples, consider his conduct in Tac. Annales 1.39.11 and 1.49.12.
24 Tac. Annales 1.42.1–5.
is found in the death of Germanicus and the subsequent events. Germanicus admonishes Vipsania Agrippina, with his dying words, to abandon her pride and obey Tiberius. She disregards this counsel and it leads to her downfall. However, it also leads to the avenging of Germanicus’ death. Tacitus alleges that her atypical conduct saved her husband from obscurity but led to her own demise.

After Germanicus’ death and funeral, Vipsania begins to come under condemnation. She is even eventually denounced and exiled by the emperor to be later recalled and killed. It is as if Germanicus plays the same role to Vipsania Agrippina that Livia played to Tiberius—he keeps her moderated merely by his presence. Once he is gone, she is left to wildness and dissipation. Her husband is no longer around to make her great, so her true personality can shine through. It seems as if Tacitus is claiming that her greatness comes entirely from Germanicus. Without him, she is wild and uncontrollable.

The relationship between Plancina and Piso is a complete reversal. The controlling figure not the husband, but rather the wife, and instead of moderating her spouse, Plancina accentuates the failings in Piso. With Plancina, Piso is detestable, treacherous and capable of murder; Without her, he is simply a disreputable character. Plancina amplifies his moral flexibility. She, like Vipsania Agrippina, is a strong, independent woman. Unlike Vipsania Agrippina, she lords over her husband. On his deathbed, Germanicus says, that he “has fallen to a woman’s treachery.” It is true that poison is generally a woman’s tool, but Germanicus’ words imply that Plancina is solely responsible for his death, that she alone made the decision to kill him. Tacitus is making it clear that Plancina is the principal player in affair. When compared to his wife, Piso appears weak. Plancina’s dominance is also evident

---

27 Ibid., 2.71.13–14.
in the Piso’s trial. Plancina claims she will be faithful to Piso, but when his fate stands in question, she make a wise (in terms of saving her own life), though immoral, decision—she abandons him. Though he has borne the trial to this point, he is unable to carry on after her betrayal and takes his own life. He is unable even to live his own life without her. Of course, in the ancient world, suicide is courageous, and once again, we see a character finding some redemption in death.

The juxtaposition of Germanicus and Vipsania Agrippina to Plancina and Piso is telling. The contrast is made all the more clear by the disparity of their situations. And in the end, Germanicus and Vipsania Agrippina emerge moderately triumphant and respectable, while Plancina and Piso come out shameful and weak.

Six women, six men. Each relationship is different. But invariably, the woman is tied to the man. Clearly, Tacitus feels that a woman is nothing without a man. However, Tacitus recognizes that with a man, a woman can wield great power and influence.

The activities of the imperial women became a standard category which authors used to evaluate the quality of emperors. Thus their consideration in historical literature was most often as one of a number of factors which depicted the quality and nature of a ‘bad’ ruler. By definition, ‘good’ emperors had wives and mothers they could control, who never overstepped the boundaries set by convention.28

A man may rule the empire, but he will do it well only if there is a good woman behind him.

28 Fischler, 127.