

PRACTICING MAGIC: AN EVALUATION OF MAGIC, GENDER, AND POWER IN
TACITUS' *ANNALES*

by

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We respectfully acknowledge the University of Arizona is on the land and territories of Indigenous peoples. Today, Arizona is home to 22 federally recognized tribes, with Tucson being home to the O’odham and the Yaqui. Committed to diversity and inclusion, the University strives to build sustainable relationships with sovereign Native Nations and Indigenous communities through education offerings, partnerships, and community service.

Dedication

In loving memory of my grandfather, Ronald Caleb (1944–2021).

Gaudeamus ergo eo, quod dabitur, reddamusque id, cum reposcemur

Seneca, *Ad Polybium* 11.3

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Abstract

Tacitus' *Annales* recounts the lives, reigns, and intrigues of the first ruling dynasty of Rome, from Tiberius to Nero. Among the machinations of the Julio-Claudians, and those within their court, Tacitus relates the various plots of prominent people who use *venenum* to manipulate or secure their power. This thesis considers four main figures' plots of *venenum* in Tacitus' *Annales*: Agrippina's murder of Claudius (12.66–7), Nero's use of *venenum* against Britannicus (13.15–7) and attempted use of *venenum* against Agrippina (14.3), Sejanus' plot against Drusus (4.8), and Piso's ambiguous involvement in the death of Germanicus (2.69). This work analyzes Tacitus' portrayal of *venenum* in each of these four episodes, as well as his depiction of the main figures in these accounts on conversation with the literary stereotype of the witch, in order to better understand Tacitus' negative comments on the Julio-Claudian imperial system. Ultimately, this work will demonstrate that Tacitus engages with the literary discourse of magic as a way to call attention to and critique the transgression of gendered and imperial power during the highly privatized Julio-Claudian principate.

Author's Note

All translations are my own. For Latin excerpts from the *Annales*, I have used E. Koestermann, *Ab Excessu Divi Augusti* (Teubner 1965).

Introduction

Tacitus, in his *Annales*, recounts the trials, tribulations, and trepidations of the first ruling dynasty of Rome, often reflecting negatively on this new power structure and its prominent players. Tacitus fills the pages of his work with greedy tyrants, familial violence and murders, and perverse power plays, all of which contribute to his negative reading of the Julio-Claudians. In his account of the early principate, Tacitus includes various instances of magic, and his portrayal of magic contributes to his examination of political and social transitions during this period. While most of the instances of magic in the *Annales* are brief mentions of accusations of *venenum* or *malefica*, Tacitus does occasionally describe important political figures using magic. These instances of important individuals engaging with any type of magical practice directly demonstrate Tacitus' comments on imperial and gendered power within the Julio-Claudian dynasty. This thesis seeks to evaluate these few, lengthier depictions of prominent figures employing witchcraft. Moreover, depictions of magic and magical practitioners within Roman literature are closely tied to discussion of gendered power, which provides another aspect of these accounts to interrogate. Therefore, this research aims to evaluate accounts of magic in the *Annales* as indicative of Tacitus' use of magic in his conversations on power and improper possession of it.

I intend, in this thesis, to evaluate four specific instances from Tacitus' *Annales* in which he describes a prominent political figure utilizing magic, specifically *venenum*. For the purposes of this paper, the accusations of witchcraft mentioned only in passing will not receive extensive attention. Rather, the selected passages are those in which Tacitus describes the actual practice or materiality of *venenum*. Few passages fit the narrow constraints in which *venenum* is a prominent feature and not mentioned in passing as an accusation against a political enemy, and they will be evaluated in order of increasing complexity. The first account considered is Agrippina's

employment of *venenum* against Claudius in *Ann.* 12.66–7, which will serve as a test-case and rubric for the following more complicated and nuanced episodes. Next, I will deal with Nero’s multiple uses of *venenum* against both Britannicus and Agrippina in *Ann.* 13.15–7 and 14.3, followed by Sejanus’ implementation of poison against Drusus in *Ann.* 4.8. The final passage discussed is *Ann.* 2.69, in which Tacitus describes the implements of *venenum* related to Germanicus’ death. These passages elucidate Tacitus’ perspective on gendered power and the employment of magic.

Although Tacitus mentions various types of magical practices in his *Annales*, this work will specifically evaluate the acts of *venenum*.¹ *Venenum* is frequently translated as “potion” but can also mean “poison” or “charm” (*Lewis & Short* s.v. “venenum”). Within the Roman mindset, there was no distinction between potions or poisons and both were viewed as magical, since they both achieved their desired result through secretive means (Rives 2003). *Venenum* is deeply entrenched in the Roman perception of magic. The *Lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficis*, created in 81 BC, explicitly addresses both *venenum* and whispered spells (*susurri*) and clearly links *venenum* to other forms of magical practice (Just. *Inst.* 4.18.5; Santoro L’Hoir 2006, 171–3). *Venenum* therefore falls within the category of a type of magical practice due to its uncanny means of accomplishing its task, regardless of whether modern readers would impose a distinction between potion or poison. Following Frankfurter’s proposal (2019, 3–20), further explicated in the section on defining magic, *venenum* and *veneficium* will remain untranslated throughout this paper, in an attempt to remove more of the ambiguity of magic, but they may be

¹ The word *veneficium* has a very similar meaning, and occasionally occurs as a collocation in the passages considered in this work. Tacitus almost exclusively employs the term *veneficium* in Book 13, when Nero initially plots to kill Britannicus. Due to the close association between these two words, *veneficium* will also be considered in conversation with *venenum* in the discussion of Book 13.

considered within the larger context of magical practice, as both terms do fall within the larger category of Roman magic.

A close reading of these specific passages will guide the analysis of this thesis. These passages will be evaluated from multiple perspectives and methodologies. While a historiographical approach will provide the central framework for the examination of these passages, this thesis will also bring together gendered discourse and conversations on etic perspectives on magic. Following a brief discussion of the definition of magic and review of the state of scholarly discourse on these issues, the remainder of the work will deal directly with these select instances from the *Annales*. The accounts of magic will be considered based on their relationship to imperial power. The first chapter will consider the two select accounts in which members of the imperial family, Agrippina and Nero, use *venenum*. The second chapter will discuss the remaining two instances of magic — Piso’s supposed use of potions in Germanicus’ death in *Ann.* 2.69 and Sejanus’ plotting in Drusus’ death in *Ann.* 4.8 — in which non-Julio-Claudian elites employ *venenum* against the imperial family. First, though, it is necessary to consider the scholarly discourse on magic, gender, and Tacitean historiography, and situate this discussion of Tacitus within current scholarship.

Defining “Magic”

Magic in the Roman world is a multivalent subject, obscure enough in antiquity that it remains ambiguous within modern scholarship on the topic. The issue of properly defining and categorizing magic has preoccupied many scholars within recent years. J.Z. Smith notably calls for scholars to abandon the discourse on “magic” as a specific concept (1995, 13–27; 2002, 73–91). Bernd-Christian Otto succinctly summarizes the state of scholarly discourse on magic, and highlights the issues with adequately defining something so ambiguous and protean (2013, 308–

47). A major issue with defining magic has been creating an emic discussion from a corpus of evidence which lacks texts from self-identified practitioners (Otto 2013, 309). Otto further comments on magic and the thesis of deviance, arguing that it is too simplistic of an approach for studying magic in its entirety throughout all antiquity, but concludes that a shift in the methodological approach to studying “magic” should be adopted within scholarship, and that magic should be studied through the lens of religion, especially as a non-normative set of practices(2013, 313–21). Yet, none of these theoretical definitions properly address magic as a social concept or discourse.²

Recently, Radcliffe G. Edmonds (2019) and David Frankfurter (2019) have both argued for re-evaluating magic in antiquity, in part by addressing the social dynamics associated with magic. These two scholars employ different approaches to magic in antiquity, but both agree on one important aspect of magic: its non-normativity. Edmonds evaluates different types of evidence of magic in an attempt to establish criteria for defining magic in addition to highlighting magic’s function as a type of discourse heavily situated in its cultural context (2019, 7–34). While the specific terminology on “magic” may differ across time and cultural constraints, the most important aspect of the term is its role in categorizing the practice as something outside the normative sphere of behavior (Frankfurter 2019, 6–8). As Frankfurter points out, “we have come to realize that many cultures have terms for some ambiguous or illegitimate sphere of ritual, often associated with some ‘other’ group or village or culture”

² Ogden (2008), 5, offers a scathing reproach to those who even attempt to define magic, stating, “the combination of weak philology with arbitrary theorizing has been corrosive. It has produced a wholly unsympathetic history of ancient magic that no one in antiquity could have found intelligible, and within which none of the ancients could have located themselves.” This statement, while harsh, does have merit in its attempts to shift focus away from doxological discussions of magic which would not aid future research. Watson (2019), 1–24, additionally adopts this approach, and focuses instead on the outcome of magic and less its categorization.

(2019, 3). In this thesis, I adopt this conception of magic as practices outside the normative constraints of a society's religious practices and rituals.

Frankfurter further argues for a redefining of the specific word “magic,” stating that the term “magic” is far too broad and burdened with modern connotations (2019, 4; 18). He proposes an alternative when discussing magic in antiquity: leave the specific words untranslated (Frankfurter 2019, 4). Employing the specific Latin terms for these magical practices has many benefits. It increases the specificity and removes the burdens associated with the English word “magic” (Frankfurter 2019, 4–8). As such, this is the practice which will be employed throughout this paper, and all Latin words for magic or magic practitioners will remain untranslated. This suggestion is a helpful way to specify the exact magical practice one is evaluating; however, the term “magic” is still useful for considering these non-normative rituals on a holistic level. While magical practices certainly were not a monolithic group, their perception within society was comparable, and therefore the broad term aids in understanding the otherness of these practices.

Magic and Gender

Turning from theoretical and determinate discussions of magic, let us now consider the state of scholarly discourse on gender in Roman magic and Tacitean historiography. Magic has often been associated with gender, and Tacitus' portrayal of women complicates an already difficult concept. Pertinent scholarship on these topics has examined the literary connection between gender and magic within Roman texts and has created a basis of understanding the discourse of magic as it existed in Roman literature.

Much recent scholarship, notably Kimberly Stratton's (2007) work, has led the field on literary analyses of magic and witches in ancient literature. Stratton questions the stereotype of

the witch in antiquity and its lasting impact on modern perceptions of witches.³ Stratton’s analysis is solely literary and provides a useful framework for considering these types of gendered stereotypes within Roman literature; she introduces key methodologies and theories for approaching gender and stereotypes within ancient texts (2007, 1–38). Stratton is clear that her work deals with larger issues of gender, and not solely women, as the connotations around witchcraft reflect masculine ideals and fears (2007, 14–38). Furthermore, she stresses magic as a type of discourse, an idea furthered by Edmonds (Stratton 2007, 12–24; Edmonds 2019). Stratton specifically addresses women and magic in Roman rhetoric and highlights how descriptions of witches interact with imperial ideology and constraints of imperial power (2007, 96–105). The demonization of women as witches within Roman literature is closely tied to women in leadership roles and the transgression of social boundaries (Stratton 2007, 105). Stratton demonstrates that magic was indicative of a perceived power that women possessed over men. This connection between magic and power is integral to my analysis of *venenum* in Tacitus’ *Annales*.

Stratton’s recent work on gender and magic introduces a connection between the concept of abjection, the mother’s body, and magic (2014, 152–80). Stratton defines abjection, a concept proposed by Julia Kristeva, as: “the revulsion experienced at confronting the wretchedness and fragility of human embodiment” (2014, 153). Magic, as a practice outside of the established order, often creates the aversion and discomfort characteristic of abjection, largely through its frequent association with women and feminine bodies. Female magical practitioners subvert the boundaries of society and in doing so transgress and violate the sanctity of the human body. Magic’s abject nature is closely tied to the feminine bodies of the practitioners, as through the

³ See especially chapters 1 and 3.

various magical actions, which often include some form of sexual deviancy, these women embody a clear disrespect for adherence to the established social order. The chastity and integrity of a woman's body was a cause of great concern in Roman society, due to the expectation she would bear children (Stratton 2014, 157). The practitioner's female gender heightens the abjection which the reader feels. These witches transgress the societal boundaries of what is acceptable, feminine behavior; instead of acting as a mother or wife, these witches perform depraved sexual acts and a wide array of eerie magical acts. All of these actions create a sense of abjection in the reader, as these women represent the fragility of laws and social expectations (Stratton 2014, 157–72). Thus a feedback loop is created in which the female witches solidified the otherness of magic and the otherness of magic solidified the otherness of women. Here, Stratton makes manifest the link between magic's non-normative nature, its "otherness," and women as "other" in a male-dominated society (2014, 170–2).

Stratton highlights how witches further transgress ancient Roman societal standards and expectations of women, and therefore oppose the established order. Witches in Roman literature often mutilate corpses, and this mutilation highlights the thin boundary between life and death (Stratton 2014, 158–61). The control over bodies which witches exhibit is representative of social hierarchies. When witches violate these corpses, they exhibit a certain amount of control over something, the human body, which society values. As Stratton notes, Roman corporeal ideology often represented hierarchical control over society, meaning that the disfigurement of individual bodies represents larger issues with maintaining hierarchical boundaries (2014, 171). Thus, the mutilation of corpses, creepy in and of itself, symbolizes societal fears of lack of control in maintaining the status quo (Stratton 2014, 161–72). Therefore, witches are indicative of male fears about the dissolution of societal hierarchies and gender roles.

Barbette Spaeth, in another chapter in the same volume, similarly discusses witches within the literary tradition, and analyzes the negative portrayals of witches in Roman literature (2014, 41–70). Spaeth contrasts the harsh depiction of witches in Roman literature with the more positive portrayals of witches in Greek literature and discusses the possible societal causes for this divergence (2014, 41–51). Spaeth proposes that a mix of several social factors influence the Roman stereotype of the witch, primarily male fears concerning increased female independence and decreased domination (2014, 53–8). One cause could relate to women’s roles and power dynamics that were changing at a societal level during the early Roman empire — the very time during which the witch becomes more prevalent in Latin literature. The character of the witch represents something that opposes the natural order, and thus is representative of women in positions of power or other functions outside their normally ascribed societal roles. As Spaeth argues, the negative depiction of female witches in Roman literature indicates increasing fear amongst men and serves as a reminder not to subvert the natural order.

In her chapter, Elizabeth Pollard (2014) explores the connection between magic, women, and the “other” of society, focusing on the nine accusations of witchcraft against women in the *Annales* to comment on the sociological facets of the accusations of witchcraft. These accusations of magic, both in actuality and as portrayed by Tacitus, reinforce the “witch” stereotype and reflect political issues within the elite families as enacted by women (Pollard 2014, 193). Accusations of witchcraft were a common way to undermine women’s authority and reinforce social hierarchies. Women would accuse other women of witchcraft, demonstrating that these accusations were perceived to be gendered tools (Pollard 2014, 201). As evident throughout Tacitus’ *Annales*, accusations of witchcraft both provided women with a weapon and provided a primary cause of their downfall, as this limited form of agency only functioned within

and reinforced the patriarchic hierarchy. Through her discussion of Tacitus, as well as the accusations of witchcraft not covered in the remainder of this research, Pollard provides useful contextualization for magic within Tacitus and early imperial Rome.

None of these scholars, however, questions the connection between gender and magic except Stratton, in her introductory chapter to *Daughters of Hecate* (2014, 1–37). Stratton acknowledges the long-held synonymy between witchcraft and women, a belief that has prevailed throughout modern scholarship (2014, 1). Yet, the material evidence suggests that magical practitioners were both male and female (Stratton 2014, 2–5). It is precisely these modern perceptions on the gendered nature of magic which has led to an anachronistic projection of women as the primary magic practitioners in antiquity (Stratton 2014, 16). Stratton thus calls the connection between women and witchcraft into question (2014, 20–1). Moreover, Stratton analyzes the relationship between women and otherness within society (2014, 14–7). The link between gender and otherness is an integral aspect of analyzing magic and gender within their social contexts, as magic often provides a means for the othering of women. Stratton’s preliminary analysis creates opportunities for future examinations into the relationship between gender and magic in ancient sources.

These sources on gender and magic demonstrate the importance of thoroughly considering the implications of the non-normative nature of magic in Tacitus’ works. Furthermore, these scholars have demonstrated that magic is often employed in ancient sources as indicative of larger societal trends and fears concerning gendered power. This connotation of magic — an aspect of otherness demonstrative of perverse power — must be considered when reading accounts of magic in Tacitus’ *Annales*. Tacitus was interacting with these social fears and implications when he accounted instances of magic in his historical narratives.

Tacitus and Gender

Scholarship on gendered dynamics within Tacitus further contextualizes the ways Tacitus writes on women as a part of his concerns about the overextension of proper systems of power. Various scholars have commented on gender within the works of Tacitus, but the writings of Rutland, Santoro L'hoir, Corbier, Joshel, and McHugh, guide the focus and analyses of gender in Tacitus throughout this thesis. These authors comment on the actuality of changing power dynamics during the early principate and how these changes are manifested in Tacitus' historical writings.⁴ Thus, these scholars provide integral historical, social, and literary contextualization for the discourse on gender within Tacitus' works, as well as early imperial Rome.

Linda Rutland (1984) and Mireille Corbier (1995) both examine how women in Tacitus' *Annales* have control over succession, and thus play an integral role within the imperial system. Women frequently intercede in adoption, which was the primary way succession was determined (Rutland 1978, 15). Further, the women in Tacitus' works employ every stratagem available to ensure their control in a situation, and thus adoption and succession is ultimately a woman's game (Rutland 1978, 17). Despite Tacitus' overwhelmingly harsh attitudes towards women, Rutland discusses the possibility of viewing women, Agrippina specifically, in association with the goddess Fortuna (1978, 28). It is womanly intercession which disrupts the established order of power, and these women resemble Fortuna in their unpredictability and emotion (Rutland 1978, 28–9). Corbier expands upon the ideas presented by Rutland, and further addresses ways

⁴ Other notable scholarship contributes to the understanding of gendered portrayals within Roman imperial literature more broadly. These scholars discuss how the portrayals of fictional women reflect the male fears and anxieties on losing dominance in society. These ideas are similar to the discussions of gender in this paper. However, as Pollard points out, Tacitus wrote on historical women. To attribute the actions of these women solely as the creation of Tacitus robs them of their agency. Thus, the comments of these scholars do provide helpful frameworks for considering gendered power within literary texts but will not be addressed at length in this section. See, for example: Richlin (1984), (2014); Nappa (2017).

in which the Julio-Claudian families were structured and the role women played in the transmission of power (1995). As Augustus had no natural sons, connections to him derived from the women in his family. No Julio-Claudian Emperor had any relations to Augustus without the intervention of a woman (Corbier 1995, 179–82). Augustus and subsequent rulers relied on women to provide male heirs and secure the dynasty through beneficial marriages (Corbier 1995, 182–5). Within the Julio-Claudian principate, a connection to Augustus meant further security and legitimacy for the ruler. The desire to have a strong link to Augustus or the heir apparent created a path for powerful women, such as Agrippina, in a domestic system (Corbier 1995, 190–2). Thus, the very system of Augustus’ principate created the opportunity for women to gain power, and even necessitated their involvement in cultivating and maintaining legitimacy. These power dynamics would have greatly informed Tacitus’ portrayal of imperial women, as they were a very prominent aspect of female power during the principate.

Joshel (1995) also examines the power of imperial women, but instead of succession, considers the portrayal of women’s character and sexual actions as reflective of the success of the imperial family. Joshel argues that the paradox of Messalina’s image is due to Roman imperial discourse in which women represent empire and, in turn, empire becomes woman (Joshel 1995, 52). According to Joshel, Messalina poses a difficulty in discerning her agency, as her actions were written by a male rhetorician (1995, 55–7). Tacitus’ portrayal of Messalina indicates that she only receives pleasure from illicit deeds, and her desires are conflated as a representation of collapse of social structures and loss of male agency (Joshel 1995, 58–61). Messalina’s voice has its own power, but Tacitus carefully reduced her to noises and verbs of motion (Joshel 1995, 62–4). Tacitus saw history as a lesson for the present, and as such similar problems prevailed from the past to the present; therefore Tacitus’ portrayal of Messalina serves

as a tool to measure the growth of the emperor's efficacy from Claudius to Trajan (Joshel 1995, 66–8). She is the epitome of a bad wife and demonstrative of the power flow in the imperial household to women and freedmen (Joshel 1995, 69–71). Women, as the interior of the imperial household, become equivalent to Rome, and the man who holds the woman holds the power. In Messalina's case, her loose and uncaring behavior represents a lack of control over the Roman state (Joshel 1995, 73–8). Joshel's article illustrates how Tacitus can use his portrayals of women to craft larger discussions on the perversity of imperial power.

The concept of female power is further evident in the *topos* of the *dux femina*, and Francesca Santoro L'Hoir studies Tacitus' fixation on the *dux femina* (1994). Santoro L'Hoir begins her first section by clearly outlining the aspects of a *dux femina*, primarily that a woman wields the power normally limited to men (1994, 6–12). A woman in power was unnatural and perverse in Tacitus' ideal Rome, and Tacitus portrays this rule as a sort of slavery (Santoro L'Hoir 1994, 12). Tacitus interweaves the type character in senatorial speeches to emphasize the theme of women's abuse of power. The speeches of both Tacitus and Livy on the *Lex Oppia* feature in this discussion (Santoro L'Hoir 1994, 12–7). The final section applies the stereotype to specific women in the *Annales*. A *dux femina* often lacks self-control (*muliebris impotentia*),⁵ and this characteristic is seen in the person of Agrippina the Younger. Tacitus creates women who are “larger-than-life,” just as Seneca does (Santoro L'Hoir 1994, 17–21). Tacitus draws from the tradition of the *dux femina* found in the works of Seneca, Vergil, and Cicero⁶ to craft his own interpretation of *dux femina* — an unnatural freak (Santoro L'Hoir 1994, 23). Through the

⁵ See Tac. *Ann.* 12.57.

⁶ See Sen. *Cons. Marc.* 1; *Phaed.* 558–62.; Vergil's Dido, esp. *Aen.* 4.136–7.; Cic. *Cael.* 66 utilizes similar invectives against Clodia.

topos of the *dux femina*, Tacitus explicitly reveals the changing dynamics of power within Roman society and his pejorative view of these transformations.

McHugh adds her own analysis of Tacitus' portrayal of women in power and the *dux femina*, and centers her analysis around Tacitus' depiction of Agrippina the Elder (2012). McHugh analyzes Germanicus' final words to his wife, and argues for a new interpretation of the passage, claiming that Tacitus is not necessarily portraying Agrippina unfavorably (2012, 73–4). McHugh additionally argues that Tacitus depicts Agrippina as a proper Roman *matrona*, and highlights the importance of studying these gendered passages in Tacitus within their larger narratives (2012, 80). It is not Tacitus' suspicion of Agrippina, but Tiberius' and Sejanus', which stains Agrippina's character (McHugh 2012, 77; 83). The negative characterizations of Agrippina both result from Sejanus and Tiberius. Thus, Tacitus is truly inadvertently critiquing Tiberius and Sejanus through having them defame Agrippina (McHugh 2012, 84). McHugh further contextualizes the term *atrox* within the discourse of *oratio*, and states that this is commenting on her tendency to speak out against the *princeps* (McHugh 2012, 86). Through her argument, McHugh demonstrates the many nuances and layers to Tacitus' depiction of imperial women and highlights the need to consider the portrayal of women within the larger narrative of power dynamics.

These scholars have argued that Tacitus frequently discusses power and women's possession of it both subtly and overtly in his *Annales*. Each author unpacks another dimension to Tacitus' portrayal of women and power within imperial Rome. Tacitus employs multiple tactics to portray issues with women and the increase in gendered power and affluence during the reign of the Julio-Claudians. Various aspects of Tacitus' comments on women, even the ones not expressly related to their power or affluence, often hint at a larger connotation within the

framework of imperial power. Through his accounts and portrayals of women, Tacitus is clearly critiquing the oscillating dynamics of power within Rome more broadly during this period of transition.

Conclusion

On the whole, the scholarship on gender both within the discourse of magic and Tacitus' works demonstrate larger social tensions. These two groups of women, witches and the women of Tacitus, both hold power which is perceived as perverse. An analysis of the convergences of these two groups will provide more insight into power dynamics and perceptions of magic in Tacitus' works and Roman society. Magic, especially as seen in Tacitus' *Annales*, must be examined through the lenses of gender and power. Tacitus' works provide an ample commentary on these concepts of gender, overextension of power, and literary portrayals of powerful women. Tacitus does not shy away from commenting on power and its improper uses, and thus his discussions of magic must be considered within the larger discourse of imperial power. We must examine Tacitus' engagement with the gendered perceptions of *venenum* in his narrative, and how it tracks onto the perversity of imperial power.

Chapter 1: Like Mother, Like Son:

Agrippina the Younger and Nero as Witches

Magic is a discourse, within a society and its literature, and Tacitus converses within this discourse through his portrayal of individuals utilizing *venenum*. In these specific accounts, Tacitus recounts the deliberation over and subsequent use of *venenum*, as opposed to merely reporting an accusation of *venenum* and moving on with the narrative. Through his depiction of the process of employing *venenum*, Tacitus engages in the discourse of magic including the tropes and other texts within this larger dialectic. By considering Tacitus' accounts of Agrippina the Younger and Nero's use of *venenum* this chapter will analyze how Tacitus' portrayal of the imperial family intersects with the language of magic and serves as a critique of gendered power under the Julio-Claudians.

Agrippina the Younger

Tacitus employs the *topos* of magic in his portrayal of Agrippina, and her use of *venenum* is included in the long list of her crimes against nature and the Roman political system.

Agrippina, as the sister of Caligula, the wife and niece of Claudius, and the mother of Nero, inhabited a unique and influential position within imperial Rome, due to the concentration of power in the hands of the emperor and the increasingly public nature of the imperial *domus*.⁷

⁷ For recent biographical work on Agrippina the Younger, see Barrett 1996; Ginsburg 2006; Southon 2019. Tacitus notes Agrippina's unusual position: Tac. *Ann.* 12.42.2: (*feminae*) *quam imperatore genitam, sororem eius, qui rerum potitus sit, et coniugem et matrem fuisse unicum ad hunc diem exemplum est.* "a woman (Agrippina), who was begotten by an emperor, who was the sister, wife, and mother of him who is master of affairs, is the only example still to this day."

Agrippina's poisoning of Claudius provides a helpful framework for the use of *venenum* within Tacitus' work. Tacitus provides the following narrative:⁸

Tum Agrippina, sceleris olim certa et oblatae occasionis propera nec ministrorum egens, de genere veneni consultavit: ne repentino et praecipiti facinus proderetur; si lentum et tabidum delegisset, ne admotus supremis Claudius et dolo intellecto ad amorem filii rediret, exquisitum aliquid placebat, quod turbaret mentem et mortem differret. deligitur artifex talium vocabulo Locusta, nuper veneficii damnata et diu inter instrumenta regni habita. eius mulieris ingenio paratum virus, cuius minister e spadonibus fuit Halotus, inferre epulas et explorare gustu solitus. adeoque cuncta mox pernotuere, ut temporum illorum scriptores prodiderint infusum delectabili boleto venenum, nec vim medicaminis statim intellectam, socordiane an Claudii vinolentia; simul soluta alvus subvenisse videbatur. igitur exterrita Agrippina, et, quando ultima timebantur, spreta praesentium invidia provisam iam sibi Xenophontis medici conscientiam adhibet. ille tamquam nisus evomentis adiuveret, pinnam rapido veneno inlitam faucibus eius demisisse creditur. (*Ann* 12.66-67)

Then Agrippina, once fixed on the evil deed, hurrying along the opportune occasion, and not lacking attendants, she deliberated about which kind of *venenum*, lest the crime be betrayed by a hasty and rash poison; if she had picked out a slow and wasting poison, lest Claudius, not brought to death and when the trick was perceived, would return to the love of his son. It was pleasing to seek out something else, which would throw his mind into confusion and delay his death. A contriver by the name of Locusta was chosen, recently condemned for poisoning and for a long time held among the tools of the sovereignty. The venom was prepared by the talent of that woman, whose attendant Halotus, one of the eunuchs, was accustomed to carry in the dinner courses and to taste test the food. And therefore all things soon became well known so that the authors of those times wrote that the poison was infused in a delectable mushroom, the strength of the drug was not immediately understood, either because of the sluggishness or the intoxication of Claudius; at the same time the unloosened belly seemed to have healed him. Therefore, terrified, Agrippina, when death was feared, and with the ill-will of those present spurned, turned toward the privity of the doctor, Xenophon, previously secured for herself. It is believed that he, as though aiding the one trying to throw up, plunged a feather smeared with fast poison down his [Claudius'] throat.

This account exemplifies the standard characteristics of *venenum*, especially in its female participants and lethal outcome.⁹ Agrippina, a woman, employs *venenum* against her husband,

⁸ See Keitel (1981) for a historiographical interpretation of Claudius' death. Aveline (2004) analyzes this passage as evidence that Claudius died of natural causes, an interesting theory but one that bears little importance in this thesis' main argumentation.

⁹ See Santoro L'Hoir (2006), 158–9 and Stratton (2007), 1. Pollard (2014) discusses the standard aspects of accusations of *venenum* in Tacitus' *Annales*. While Pollard's work does not include this account, or any of the others

Claudius, through secretive and deceptive measures to deadly ends. Tacitus shows Agrippina's decision to kill Claudius, describing her as *certa sceleris*, as well as her crafty deliberation, "she deliberated about what kind of *venenum*" (*de genere veneni consultavit*). Agrippina calculates the risks of slow versus fast acting *venenum* with Nero's ascension to power in mind: "lest Claudius, not brought to death and when the trick was perceived, would return to the love of his son" (*ne admotus supremis Claudius et dolo intellecto ad amorem filii redirect*). Agrippina thus makes her decision based on the fear that Claudius would learn of her plot and make his son, Britannicus, heir instead of Nero. Agrippina moreover enlists the aid of Locusta, a woman condemned for poisoning (*veneficii damnata*). Locusta's role as the very clear witch figure is a necessary aspect of Agrippina's plot, and common in Tacitus' other accounts of *venenum*, as, for example, Nero likewise employs her services in Book 13 (*Ann.* 13.15.3), and Piso is connected to a similar figure, a woman named Martina, in Book 2 (*Ann.* 2.74.2). Tacitus additionally describes Locusta as "for a long time held among the tools of the sovereignty" (*diu inter instrumenta regni habita*). This comment reflects poorly on Agrippina and the imperial system in which Locusta, a famous witch, was well-known to be associated with imperial machinations. Tacitus further depicts Agrippina as craftily reliant upon *venenum* and determined to kill Claudius, as she is already prepared with a backup plan and another accomplice to attempt to poison Claudius a second time. She had previously made Xenophon, the doctor, her accomplice (*provisam iam sibi...conscientiam*) before the need for his intervention even arose. Following Claudius' death, Agrippina then benefits from her contrivances and secures the principate for Nero.¹⁰ In its female agents, deadly outcome, politicized motivation, and consultation with a

evaluated in this thesis, she provides a useful discussion of the gendered connotation of *venenum* accusations in Rome, and how they often function as a politicized tool.

¹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 12.69.1: *Tunc medio diei tertium ante Idus Octobris, foribus Palatii repente diductis, comitante Burro Nero egreditur ad cohortem, quae more militiae excubiis adest.* "then in the middle of the third day before the Ides

witch figure, this account exemplifies the standard perception of *venenum* as a tool through which women gain access to power. That is exactly how Agrippina wields it in this narrative.

Magic, especially *venenum*, was connected to people outside the norms of accepted society — the “Other” — hence its close association to women in a society where men controlled the societally approved avenues of power.¹¹ The inclusion of *venenum* is a clear way to signal the transgression of the boundaries of power, and here, the connection between magic and women’s power is explicit. Agrippina’s unique position within the imperial household placed her in close proximity to the emperors in various capacities at different points in her life.¹² Her relationships to these powerful men afforded her a level of affluence and thus she occupied a role of immense power, a role which Tacitus depicts her cultivating throughout his narrative. The use of magic and its inherent connotation of gendered power dynamics serves as another depraved feature of Julio-Claudian imperial power. It is through the hands of a woman, using *venenum*, that the power of the state passes from one emperor to another. Under the imperial structure, since power is concentrated in the hands of one individual, the *princeps*, those close to him also gain significant power and affluence, and the increased condensation of power within the hands of the ruling family diminishes the power of the Senate.¹³ All of Rome is at the mercy of a woman, because of the imperial structure.

of October, with the doors of the Palatine suddenly thrown open, with Burrus as a companion, Nero went out to the cohort, which was present for the vigils according to the custom of the military service.”

¹¹ See especially Stratton (2014) and Pollard (2014) for their respective discussions on the association between magic, witches, *venenum*, and social “others” in Roman literature and society, previously discussed in the introduction.

¹² Gillespie (2014) remarks on Agrippina’s unique position and power and demonstrates how Tacitus uses her as the only female *exemplum*.

¹³ Oakley (2009a) analyzes Tacitus’ preoccupation with the Senate and the Senate’s relationship with the emperor. For more on the imperial court, and how others gained power in relation to the emperor, see Wallace-Hadrill (1996).

Tacitus closely ties *venenum* to Agrippina's manipulation of power and Julio-Claudian succession, which is the result of the changing role of the imperial household.¹⁴ In the above passage from the end of Book 12, Agrippina kills Claudius and delays the announcement of his death until she has made the arrangements for Nero to be hailed as emperor (12.66–9). Thus, she directly controls the death of one emperor and the rise of the next emperor. She, and Tacitus, further display her control at the beginning of Book 13. Tacitus begins his account of Nero's reign with a murder, which Nero did not know about, committed by Agrippina: "The first death in the new principate, of Junius Silanus the proconsul of Asia, was prepared through the device of Agrippina, while Nero was unaware" (*prima novo principatu mors Iunii Silani proconsulis Asiae ignaro Nerone per dolum Agrippinae paratur* 13.1.1). Tacitus frames Nero's reign in relation not just to Agrippina, but also her proclivity towards murder by secretive means. Agrippina uses *venenum* to murder someone within her family unit and, due to the increasingly public nature of the imperial family, her already horrific crime has disastrous consequences for the empire. In recounting the narrative in this way, Tacitus highlights the consequences of Agrippina's increasing power from Book 12, and the larger issues with the publicization of the imperial *domus*.¹⁵ As she murders Claudius, she not only kills a member of her family, which is horrific enough, but she also kills the *paterfamilias* of the entire Roman empire. Agrippina's power has already transgressed the acceptable boundaries of Roman society, in which women were not supposed to have political power, much less a prominent role within the Roman state, and her use of *venenum* foregrounds the uncanny nature of Agrippina's power and role within

¹⁴ Rutland (1978) discusses the role women increasingly played in validating an emperor's claim to power within the Julio-Claudian principate. Santoro L'Hoir (1994) similarly addresses the increased power women exhibited in Tacitus, as demonstrated by Tacitus' fascination with the *dux femina*. Corbier (1995) discusses how the female Julio-Claudians lent legitimacy to the male rulers. Bauman (2002) discusses women in Roma diachronically, and demonstrates how the position of women was and was not impacted by the transition to empire.

¹⁵ Milnor (2008) analyzes the changing domesticity under the Julio-Claudians. Ramsby and Severy (2007) document how the domestication of Rome manifests itself in the visual record.

Roman politics. Through this account, Tacitus clearly links the means of imperial succession, especially under the Julio-Claudians, to this perverse power of Agrippina, and her means of accomplishing these acts exemplifies the threatening nature of her power.

Tacitus' readers cannot read this account without also considering the parallels between Agrippina and Livia, the wife of Augustus and mother of Tiberius, as recorded in Book 1 of the *Annales*.¹⁶ The similarities and notable differences in the way Tacitus describes these two imperial women as gaining and maintaining their power demonstrates how Tacitus portrays Agrippina's power as exceptionally unacceptable.¹⁷ Tacitus depicts Agrippina and Livia as women of immense power, who exercise it illicitly to secure their own further power in ruling through their sons (Rutland 1978, 17–21). Yet Tacitus is less resolute in his blame of Livia. He credits the belief that Livia killed Augustus as a rumor, simply stating; “certain people suspected that [the sickness of Augustus] was his wife's crime” (*quidam scelus uxoris suspectabant*. 1.5.1). This vague uncertainty contrasts significantly with Tacitus' solid condemnation of Agrippina; undoubtedly the architect of Claudius' murder. Tacitus continues the parallels between these two imperial women as he introduces their influence in their sons' regimes the same way — with murder.¹⁸ These two murders were both carried out without the permission or knowledge of the new *princeps*, at the command of their mothers.¹⁹ Again, Livia's involvement in Agrippa's murder remains more ambiguous, while Tacitus explicitly blames Agrippina for the death of

¹⁶ Many scholars have noted the many similarities between these two imperial women, see Foubert (2010), Dirksen (2020) for the most recent work on this topic. More attention will be given to Livia's role in the imperial system in the following chapter.

¹⁷ See especially Santoro L'Hoir (2006), 127–74 for a discussion on the transgression of various social and political boundaries within the Julio-Claudian principate.

¹⁸ Tac. Ann. 1.6.1: *primum facinus novi principatus fuit Postumi Agrippae caedes*. “The first crime of the new principate was the murder of Agrippa Postumus”; c.f. 13.1.1.

¹⁹ Tac. Ann. 1.6.3: *nuntianti centurioni, ut most militiae, factum esse quod imperasset, neque imperasse sese et rationem facti reddendam apud senatum respondit*. “When the centurion announces, as was the custom of the military, that the deed, which he had ordered, had been completed, he (Tiberius) replied that he himself had not ordered the deed, and a judgement of the deed must be brought before the Senate.”; c.f. 13.1.1 (note 3).

Junius Silanus.²⁰ Even the methods of the two women demonstrate the differences in their parallel narratives. Tacitus reports the rumor that Livia may have poisoned Augustus, but the actual term *venenum* or any synonyms do not appear. Agrippa's death was ordered through the guards, and again there is no mention of *venenum* or *veneficium* anywhere in these sections. Livia, the first model of an imperial woman with massive amounts of power, exercises her extensive command but still refrains from the unnatural and magical methods which Agrippina often uses. In contrast, Tacitus depicts Agrippina deliberating over which type of *venenum* to use, and she goes so far as to poison Claudius twice when the first attempt was unsuccessful. Tacitus shows his reader an Agrippina who embraces the practice of *venenum*. Livia therefore is less culpable than Agrippina, and the comparison to Livia here only heightens the new extremes to which Agrippina has taken her power. Livia already wielded an unacceptable amount of power for a woman; Agrippina surpasses what was already beyond the boundaries of acceptable gendered power.

Tacitus further highlights Agrippina's position as an extremely powerful woman through engaging with the discourse of magic and the stereotype of the witch.²¹ Agrippina's use of *venenum* links her to other literary magical practitioners and Tacitus exploits this connection in his portrayal of Agrippina and critique of her command.²² Roman literature contains many examples of these women, *veneficae*, who engage in various types of magical practices. Notable examples include Horace's Canidia, Lucan's Erichtho, and Seneca's Medea. As discussed by

²⁰ Tac. Ann. 1.6.2: *propius vero Tiberium ac Liviam, illum metu, hanc novercalibus odiis, suspecti et invisi iuvenis caedem festinavisse*. "Indeed it was more likely that Tiberius and Livia, that man because of fear, this woman because of the hatred of a step-mother, hastened the death of the mistrusted and hated youth."

²¹ Nappa (2017), Richlin (2014), and Fischler (1994) all discuss the various ways Roman imperial literature employed stereotypes to discuss masculine fears over the increase of (imperial) women's power.

²² Scholars have previously noted Agrippina's depiction as a *noverca*, see Watson (1995) for an extensive discussion of the topic. While Agrippina certainly does embody the traits of a *noverca*, for due to the scope of this thesis, this section will only evaluate the traits of witches, which emerge due to Agrippina's explicit use of *venenum*.

Spaeth and Stratton, there were standard, established aspects of the literary stereotype of a witch.²³ These women, in addition to practicing magic, all usually had an ugly appearance,²⁴ heightened and uncontrollable sexual desires,²⁵ occupied the liminal spaces of society,²⁶ and participated in some form of corporeal mutilation.²⁷ Tacitus' portrayal of Agrippina adheres to some, but not all, of the characteristics of Roman literary witches. Unlike the witches who haunt the pages of Roman literature, Agrippina does not possess an unpleasant appearance,²⁸ and she remains in control of, rather than controlled by, her sexual exploits.²⁹ Despite these differences, Agrippina's portrayal still interacts with the literary portrayals of witches, and analysis of the connection between the depiction of powerful literary witches and the powerful Roman empress will demonstrate Tacitus' criticism of Agrippina's power.

²³ Spaeth (2014), 46–52; Stratton (2014). See also Ogden (2002), 124–5.

²⁴ C.f.: Hor. *Sat.* 1.8.23–6: *Vidi egomet nigra succinctam vadere palla/Canidiam pedibus nudis passoque capillo,/cum Sagana maiore ululantem: pallor utrasque/fecerat horrendas adspectu.* “I myself saw saw Canidia rush in, with her black robe girded, with bare feet and loose hair, howling with the elder Sagana: their paleness had made both horrifying to look at.”; Lucan, *Phars.* 6.515–8: *Tenet ora profanae/Foeda situ macies, coeloque ignota sereno/terribilis Stygio facies pallore gravatur,/impexis onerata comis.* “The disgusting face of the profane woman holds ghastliness in decrepitude, and unknown to the bright heaven her terrible appearance was weighed down by Stygian paleness, burdened with uncombed hair.”

²⁵ Horace, in his *Satires* 1.8 and *Epodes* 5, depicts his witches creating erotic love potions. The witches in both poems are crafting the love potions specifically for their own use upon the objects of their desire.

²⁶ Luc. *Phars.* 6.510–2: *illi namque nefas urbis summittere tecto/aut laribus feral caput, desertaque busta/incolit et tumulos expulsus obtinet umbris.* “For her (Erictho) it was a crime to send her wild head under a roof of the city or the lares, and she inhabits the deserted groves and possesses the graves with the shades having been expelled.”; Horace *Sat.* 1.8 and *Ep.* 5 likewise portrays his witches in graveyards, lurking amongst the dead.

²⁷ Horace *Sat.* 1.8 the witches loot the graveyard for bones; *Ep.* 5 they use the flesh of a young boy in a love potion; Lucan *Phars.* 6.529–568 Lucan provides a lengthy description of Erictho defiling the dead and dying to harvest parts of their body.

²⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 12.64.3: Tacitus, when comparing Agrippina to Lepida, lists both women's beauty among the gifts given to them by the kindness of fortune.; 14.9.1: Nero comments on the beauty of his dead mother's corpse.

²⁹ Tacitus further portrays Agrippina as a woman who weaponizes her sexuality, and wields it as a tool to secure power: Tac. *Ann.* 12.7.3: *nihil domi impudicum, nisi dominationi expediret.* “There was nothing unchaste at home, unless it would procure dominion.”; 14.2.2: *(Agrippina) quae puellaribus annis stuprum cum Lepido spe dominationis admiserat, pari cupidine usque ad libita Pallantis provoluta et exercita ad omne flagitium patrum nuptiis.* “(Agrippina) who in her girlish years had permitted sexual deviancy with Lepidus because of her hope of dominion, with equal desire having submitted herself to the pleasures of Pallas and having exercised every disgraceful thing in the marriage to her uncle.” Despite the nuance that the modern reader can see in Agrippina's control over her sexual desires, to a Roman reader, she was still sexually licentious, especially since she was a woman and women were expected to be chaste outside of marriage. See Pomeroy (1975), 149–63 for more on the ideal Roman *matrona*.

While Tacitus' representation of Agrippina fails to meet some of these descriptors, it still engages with the witch stereotype, specifically in Agrippina's explicit use of *venenum* and her masculinization, which leads to her liminality. Tacitus depicts Agrippina as determined to employ *venenum* and she goes so far as to administer it a second time after her first attempt to kill Claudius failed. He also does not include any ambiguity in this account, as in the similar account of Livia and the death of Augustus. Agrippina was responsible for Claudius' death and Nero's succession, and she achieved this through means of *venenum*.

Additionally, Tacitus famously masculinizes Agrippina, which relegates her to a liminal space.³⁰ She serves as a contrast to Messalina, Claudius' previous wife, who exemplifies the standard traits of feminine folly.³¹ Instead, Agrippina is masculine in her self-control and aims at power:

versa ex eo civitas, et cuncta feminae oboediebant, non per lasciviam, ut Messalina, rebus Romanis inludenti. adductum et quasi virile servitium: palam severitas ac saepius superbia; nihil domi impudicum, nisi dominationi expediret. cupido auri immensa obtentum habebat, quasi subsidium regno pararetur. (*Ann.* 12.7.3)

The state was changed from this playing with Roman affairs, and everything was obedient to a woman, not through wantonness, as with Messalina. A terse and almost manly servitude: Openly, there was severity and more often haughtiness; at home there was nothing immodest, unless it would procure dominion. Boundless desire for gold had a pretense, as though a reserve was prepared for the sovereignty.

Tacitus states that Agrippina's influence over Rome, after her marriage to Claudius, was, "a terse and almost manly servitude" (*adductum et quasi virile servitium*). The passage continues, and Tacitus ascribes more masculine qualities, such as *severitas* and control over sexuality (*nihil domi impudicum*), to Agrippina. These traits would have been good had they not been possessed

³⁰ See Santoro L'Hoir (1994) and Rutland (1978) for brief comments on Agrippina's masculinization. Both authors compare Agrippina with her hyper-feminine foil, Messalina.

³¹ Tac. Ann. 12.7.3: *Versa ex eo civitas, et cuncta feminae oboediebant, non per lasciviam, ut Messalina, rebus Romanis inludenti.* "The state was changed from this playing with Roman affairs, and everything was obedient to a woman, not through wantonness, as with Messalina."

by a woman.³² Her actions, especially as she wields and manipulates her power, separate her from other Roman women. Agrippina does not shy away from seeking power and her attempts to secure power end up coming across as masculine actions, since men were the ones who normally held power. Tacitus depicts Agrippina, an immensely powerful woman, as something weird and unusual, and his masculinization of her due to her power, demonstrates that she does not fit within the accepted bounds of society. Through his masculinization of Agrippina, Tacitus emphasizes her actual gender and the inappropriateness of her actions, and therefore relegates her to a liminal part of society. Thus, because of her masculinization and resulting “otherness,” Agrippina further fits the stereotype of the witch, as an integral aspect of magic in Rome was its liminality.³³ Just like Roman literary witches, Agrippina, like the power she possessed, existed outside the normal and acceptable boundaries of Roman society.

Despite Tacitus’ omission of expected “witchy” characteristics, he nevertheless engages with the discourse of magic and comments on Agrippina’s power. Tacitus utilizes the stereotype of the witch to describe this powerful imperial woman, but he is free to pick and choose which aspects of the stereotype he applies to Agrippina. His use of stereotypes and stock characters is prevalent throughout his *Annales*, notably with his portrayal of Tiberius. Tacitus does impose aspects of set stereotypes upon people, even when they do not necessarily perfectly align with the person’s actions.³⁴ Thus, Tacitus is willing to tweak his portrayals of individuals as informed by different stereotypes. Moreover, Tacitus’ Roman audience would have been familiar with the

³² McHugh (2012) posits a similar sentiment about Tacitus’ portrayal of Agrippina the Elder, who likewise had traits that would have been admirable in a man.

³³ See the discussion in the introductory chapter of this thesis on the nature of magic in antiquity, especially the work of Edmonds (2019), Frankfurter (2019) and Stratton (2014). *Vid.* note 26 on the liminality of witches in Roman literature.

³⁴ Walker (1952) discusses Tacitus’ fondness of using different stock characters in his *Annales*. Tiberius the tyrant is the most famous example of this tendency, but Walker also discusses other stock characters, such as the victim, which Tacitus molds his historical figures to fit. See also Daitz (1960), Dunkle (1971).

literary stereotype of the witch, and the fact that he expressly utilizes the word *venenum* introduces the possibility for further aspects of magic to appear in his portrayal of Agrippina.³⁵ This period saw the invention and solidification of the Roman literary stereotype of the witch. Many notable examples of witches from Roman literature, such as Lucan's Erichtho and Seneca's Medea, were products of Neronian literature.³⁶ As such, they should be read in conversation with the actions and persons of Nero and other members of the imperial family. Certainly, the concept of Latin witches existed prior to these authors, but the prevalence of the witch stereotype in these works is not something to be ignored. Tacitus does attribute some, but not all, of the aspects of the witch stereotype onto Agrippina. His decision to pick and choose certain witch qualities in his portrayal of Agrippina calls attention to the very real and very immense power that Agrippina held. There is no need for Tacitus to pull out the rhetorical and stylistic stops in his comparison between Agrippina and witches, because she is what is ultimately at the root of a witches' repulsiveness, and she is exactly what they metaphorically represent — a very powerful woman.

Nero

The standard power dynamics of Rome are distorted further as Nero enters the scene.³⁷

Nero unsettles both the established order and the standard portrayal of witches through his use of

³⁵ For more on ancient audiences, see Marincola 2010. Stratton (2007) thoroughly analyzes the prevalence of the witch stereotype in Roman literature, and the familiarity that a Roman audience would have with it.

³⁶ For more on the development of these works of literature under Nero, see the chapters of Buckley and Hardie in Buckley and Dinter (2013).

³⁷ Much recent scholarship has considered the nature of Nero and his character. Champlin (1998a), (1998b), and (2003b) has proposed various new analyses of Nero and focuses on predecessor denigration as a cause for certain negative aspects of Nero's legacy. For the latest biographical work, see Champlin (2003a). Gillespie (2019) comments on how Tacitus writes both class and gender against Nero, important themes for understanding Tacitus' portrayal of Nero within the context of magic literature. Braund (1983) and Ash (2015) both analyze the Nero's hunt for Dido's gold to provide insight into Nero's characterization. Keitel (2009) discusses the Neronian *Annales*, and uses the many deaths which occur in these books as a way to frame her analysis. See also Schmitzer (2005).

venenum. Much like his mother, he utilizes *venenum* to increase his political power, by removing his greatest rival: his step-brother Britannicus. Tacitus states:

Nero intellecta invidia odium intendit; urgentibusque Agrippinae minis, quia nullum crimen neque iubere caedem fratris palam audebat, occulta molitur pararique venenum iubet, ministro Pollione Iulio praetoriae cohortis tribuno, cuius cura attinebatur damnata veneficii nomine Locusta, multa scelerum fama. nam ut proximus quisque Britannico neque fas neque fidem pensi haberet olim provisum erat. primum venenum ab ipsis educatoribus accepit tramisitque exsoluta alvo parum validum, sive temperamentum inerat, ne statim saeviret. sed Nero lenti sceleris impatiens minitari tribuno, iubere supplicium veneficae, quod, dum rumorem respiciunt, dum parant defensiones, securitatem morarentur. promittentibus dein tam praecipitem necem quam si ferro urgeretur, cubiculum Caesaris iuxta decoquitur virus cognitis antea venenis rapidum. (*Ann.* 13.15.3–5)

With this ill-will having been perceived, Nero extended his hatred; because of the pressing threats of Agrippina, since he openly was daring no crime nor to order the death of his brother, he undertook secret things and ordered a *venenum* to be prepared, with Julius Pollio the tribune of the praetorian cohort as his accomplice, by whose care Locusta, condemned for poison and very famous for wicked deeds, was detained. For it was previously arranged that each person close to Britannicus had neither obligation of duty nor trust. Britannicus first accepted the poison from his own tutors, and having thrown up, he passed it through as it was too weak, or a moderated poison entered, lest it immediately rage. But Nero, intolerant of slow crime, threatened the tribune and ordered the death of the poisoner, because, while they were looking out for the rumor, while they were preparing protection, they were delaying security. Then with them promising a death as quick as if stabbed by a sword, next to the emperor's bedroom, a rapid poison was brewed with poisons previously known.

Nero's murder of Britannicus eerily resembles Agrippina's murder of Claudius and exhibits many traits of a standard literary account of *venenum*. Nero undertakes his poisoning with the intention of solidifying his position as emperor; Britannicus was gaining favor with the people and Agrippina was using Britannicus to threaten Nero.³⁸ Nero, much like Agrippina, employs *venenum* as a tool for securing power.³⁹ Locusta's involvement in Nero's plot further emphasizes the uncanny nature of the plan. Locusta is a very witchy figure, and Tacitus here describes her as

³⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 13.15.1: Nero attempts to publicly humiliate Britannicus but the crowd felt pity for Britannicus.; 13.14: Agrippina, sensing her control over Nero is waning, threatens to place Britannicus in power.

³⁹ *Vid.* note 9.

“condemned for poison and very famous for wicked deeds” (*damnata veneficii...multa scelerum fama*).⁴⁰ Nero’s employment of Locusta connects the emperor to this infamous magical practitioner, and her mere involvement in these events heightens their magical and unnatural nature. Nero also explicitly deliberates on a secretive way to kill Britannicus, “he undertook secret things and ordered a *venenum* to be prepared” (*occulta molitur pararique venenum iubet*), and, when the first attempt was not successful, he commissions a second, more fast-acting *virus* (*virus cognitis antea venenis rapidum*). Tacitus’ portrayal of the successful attempt to kill Britannicus demonstrates how Nero takes the perversity of *venenum* even further than previous instances, including Agrippina’s plotting. Nero is fixed on killing Britannicus by means of poison alone, and does not consider any other methods, a fact which Tacitus calls attention to when he says “a death as quick as if stabbed by a sword” (*tam praecipitem necem quam si ferro urgeretur*). This small phrase highlights alternative, less strange avenues Nero could have used to kill Britannicus.⁴¹ Instead, Nero doubles down on his decision to use poison and Tacitus recounts the potion being brewed within the room right next to Nero’s bedroom: “next to the emperor’s bedroom, a rapid poison was brewed with poisons previously known” (*cubiculum Caesaris iuxta decoquitur virus cognitis antea venenis rapidum*). This detail adds an additional layer of creepiness and demonstrates the transgressions of boundaries within the imperial household. Due to the increased the significance of the imperial *domus*, to brew *venenum* within the actual physical house of the emperor is a very clear demonstration of corruption within the imperial household, which extends to all of Rome.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Ann.* 12.66: *veneficii damnata* “condemned for poisoning,” discussed above.

⁴¹ Agrippina similarly has a backup plan which relies on *venenum*, *Ann.* 12.67.2. However, as previously discussed (note 9), *venenum* was a woman’s tool. Nero’s initial use of it is unexpected and jarring, but his continued use is even worse. While the murder of Britannicus would never have been socially acceptable, Nero’s choice to use *venenum* instead of a more physical method, such as ordering someone to stab him, is even more disturbing.

Tacitus' portrayal of Nero further interacts with the literary portrayal of magic, as Tacitus' Nero not only employs *venenum*, but also exhibits witch-like traits. Nero is both a man and the emperor, two important and defining characteristics which oppose the standard portrayal and dynamics of magic within Roman literature. As previously mentioned, magical practitioners were generally depicted as ugly, wild women who occupied the liminal spaces of society. Yet aside from these surface level, albeit important, characteristics, Nero has much in common with these literary witches. As we shall see in the following analysis, Nero, as a witch, subverts the subversion.

Nero first exemplifies the characteristics of literary witches in his frequent participation in improper nocturnal activities, just as witches often tend to do. Tacitus states that Nero would go out at night disguised as a slave and visit bars and brothels: "where Nero was wandering through the streets of the city and the brothels and the lurking-places, having arranged his disguise in the clothes of a slave" (*qua Nero itinera urbis et lupanaria et deverticula veste servili in dissimulationem sui compositus pererrabat*).⁴² Horace and Lucan's witches are similarly active at night. Horace's narrator states, "I was in no way able to destroy or hinder these women, once the wandering moon brought forth her face, so that they may not pick bones and harmful herbs" (*has nullo perdere possum / nec prohibere modo, simul ac vaga luna decorum / protulit os, quin ossa legant herbasque nocentis Sat. 1.8.20–2*). Lucan's Erictho solely comes out at night, and thus her face is "unknown to the bright heaven" (*coeloque ignota sereno*).⁴³ Likewise,

⁴² Tac. Ann. 13.25.1: *Q. Volusio P. Scipione consulibus otium foris, foeda domi lascivia, qua Nero itinera urbis et lupanaria et deverticula veste servili in dissimulationem sui compositus pererrabat... in modum captivitatis nox agebatur*. "When Q. Volusius and P. Scipio were consuls, there was leisure abroad, and disgraceful licentiousness at home, where Nero was wandering through the streets of the city and the brothels and the lurking-places, having arranged his disguise in the clothes of a slave... night was carried out in the way of captivity."

⁴³ Lucan, *Phars.* 6.516–7: *coeloque ignota sereno/terribilis Stygio facies pallore gravatur*. "unknown to the bright heaven her terrible appearance was weighed down by Stygian paleness."

Lucan states that it was night when Pompey found Erictho creating a new spell: “with night being high in the sky” (*alta nocte poli*).⁴⁴ These individuals all utilize the cover of night to carry out depraved acts, such as collecting materials for and testing out new spells. Their behavior does not conform with the standards of upstanding Roman citizens, and Nero’s nocturnal activities place him in the same category as witches of those who threaten the general welfare of Roman citizens: “night was carried out in the way of captivity” (*in modum captivitatis nox agebatur* 13.25.1). Nero moreover believed that these happenings were secret, and that he was able to disguise himself as a slave.⁴⁵ In doing so, Nero was engaging in threatening nocturnal activities in secret while subverting the social boundaries of slave and master — all aspects associated with the non-normative nature of magic.

Moreover, Nero’s decision to use *venenum* inherently feminizes him, creating a notable contrast to Agrippina’s masculinization. The connotation of *venenum* as something within the category of magic is inextricably linked to female power. Nero’s use of *venenum* clearly subverts the standard gendered connotations of magic within the realm of Roman literature. Yet this is not the only instance in which Nero acts in a standardly feminine way. A notable example of Nero’s intentional adoption of feminine behavior is his marriage to Pythagoras. In this wedding, Nero acts as the woman: “Except after a few days he married one from the group of defilers (whose name was Pythagorus) in the manner of ceremonial weddings, the bridal veil was placed upon the emperor, the augurs were sent in; the dowry and wedding bed and nuptial torches, all were

⁴⁴ Lucan, *Phars.* 6.570–1, 577–8: *alta/nocte poli...illa magis magicisque deis incognita verba/ temptebat, carmenque novos fingebat in usus*. “with night being high in the sky...that woman was trying out new words unknown to mages and magical gods, and she was creating a spell for new purposes.”

⁴⁵ *Tac. Ann.* 13.25.2–4 recounts the story of Julius Montanus, a member of the senatorial class who encountered Nero during one of his nightly escapades. Nero attacked Montanus, and Montanus fought back. When Montanus realized he had struck Nero, he asked for forgiveness, and was forced to commit suicide. This anecdote demonstrates that Nero’s disguise, however convincing it actually was, was an integral aspect of his nocturnal revelries.

there” (*nisi paucos post dies uni ex illo contaminatorum grege (nomen Pythagorae fuit) in modum sollemnium coniugiorum denupsisset, inditum imperatori flammeum, missi auspices; dos et genialis torus et faces nuptiales, cuncta denique* 15.37.4). Tacitus builds up his narrative and describes the various types of sexual defilements occurring at the party on Tigellinus’ raft, all of which culminate in this unusual wedding. This one party serves as an example of the types of immoralities that Nero would regularly indulge in, illustrating that Nero’s unmasculine behaviors were a regular occurrence. Additionally, this wedding demonstrates not just the feminization of Nero, but other aspects of the witch stereotype, specifically his sexual deviancy.

Tacitus’ depiction of Nero’s lusts further connects him to the standard portrayal of witches in Roman literature. Nero is also a slave to his sexual appetite, and the people who appease it. As previously mentioned, a common facet of witches was their involvement with erotic magic and uncontrollable lusts.⁴⁶ Nero’s subservience to his lusts is evident in his final decision to remove his mother, Agrippina. Agrippina’s influence over Nero at first wanes due to his romantic entanglement with Acte, but Nero ultimately decides to kill Agrippina because of his wife Poppaea’s taunts.⁴⁷ Here, an integral decision which impacted the rest of the Roman political sphere was made due to Nero’s libido. However, this is not the only instance of Nero’s subjugation to lechery. Tacitus states that as her influence over Nero began to fade, Agrippina prepared to seduce him: “Cluvius passes down that Agrippina, carried by desire for retaining her power so far, that in the middle of the day, when it was the time Nero was inflamed through wine

⁴⁶ *Vid.* note 25.

⁴⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 13.12.1: *Ceterum infracta paulatim potentia matris delapso Nerone in amorem libertae, cui vocabulum Acte fuit...* “but the influence of his mother was broken little by little with Nero having fallen in love with a freedwoman, whose name was Acte...”; 14.1.1: *Poppaetae, quae sibi matrimonium et discidium Octaviae incolumi Agrippina haud sperans crebris criminationibus, aliquando per facetias incusare principem et pupillum vocare, qui iussis alienis obnoxius non modo imperii, sed libertatis etiam indigeret.* Poppaea, who not hoping a marriage for herself and a divorce for Octavia with Agrippina alive, with many complaints, ever she would through jests blame the princeps and call him a ward, who was submissive to the commands of others, lacked not only power but also freedom.”

and meals, she offered herself, adorned and prepared for incest, to the more often drunk [Nero].” (*tradit Cluvius Agrippinam ardore retinendae potentiae eo usque provectam, ut medio diei, cum id temporis Nero per vinum et epulas incalesceret, offerret se saepius temulento comptam et incesto paratam...* 14.2.1). Alternatively, Nero himself was the catalyst of this potential incestuous relationship: “Fabius Rusticus recounts that it [the crime of incest] was desired not by Agrippina but by Nero” (*Fabius Rusticus non Agrippinae, sed Neroni cupitum id memorat* 14.2.2). This rumor of incest solidifies the connection between sexuality and control over Nero, as it demonstrates that Nero was so subject to his sexual desires that seduction appeared a feasible way for Agrippina to maintain her power.

Nero’s actions towards his mother, Agrippina, contribute to Tacitus’ presentation of Nero within the constraints of a literary witch, and the audience sees Agrippina and her womb defiled both by the actions of Nero. Nero’s possible incest with Agrippina also represents abjection of the human body, as sexual deviancy can often create this uneasy feeling and incest is a clear form of sexual deviancy and the breaking down of social boundaries.⁴⁸ Stratton comments on the close connection between motherhood and the grotesque mutilation of human bodies in the practices and perceptions of witches (2014, 157). In the allegations of incest with Agrippina, whether it was instigated by Nero or Agrippina, Tacitus creates this sense of abjection for his reader. The mother’s body is (possibly) defiled. A similar effect is achieved when Tacitus recounts that Nero commented on the physical appearance of Agrippina upon seeing her dead body: “Whether Nero looked upon his dead mother and praised the beauty of her body, there are those who recount this and those who deny it” (*Aspexeritne matrem exanimem Nero et formam corporis laudaverit, sunt qui tradiderint, sunt qui abnuant.* 14.9.1). While Tacitus does note that

⁴⁸ Hor. *Sat.* 1.8: Canidia and her fellow witches steal bones; Hor. *Ep.* 5: the witches kill a young boy to create a potion; Luc. *Phars.* 6.507–68: Erichtho defiles both the dead and the dying.

some people disagree as to whether Nero actually made this comment or not, the impact on the reader is the same. Nero forces a sexual connotation upon his mother's corpse, in the section immediately after Agrippina drew attention to her womb, crying out upon her death "strike the belly!" ('*ventri feri*').⁴⁹ As the originator of the plot to kill Agrippina, Nero is the one who creates this mutilation of Agrippina's body. In this way, much like the witches of Roman literature, Nero desecrates the body of his mother, and creates the uncomfortable revulsion of abjection.

Nero's use of *venenum* and characterization as a witch reflect poorly on the emperor and demonstrate Tacitus' critique of the imperial system. Nero's position as emperor should negate the necessity for *venenum*, as it was typically utilized by women who had little other means to power. Nero's use of *venenum*, then, reflects on the state of imperial power and Nero's position as emperor. As Britannicus was a member of the imperial family, Nero could not easily depose him. His need for secrecy and desire to remove his family member indicates the instability of his position within the empire.⁵⁰ Additionally, Nero's initial desire to kill Agrippina via *venenum*, only to be thwarted by her foresight and preparedness, further demonstrates the lack of control Nero had over affairs.⁵¹ Tacitus repeatedly describes Nero, and therefore the entire empire, as

⁴⁹ Tac. Ann. 14.8.5: *iam ad mortem centurioni ferrum destringenti protendens uterum 'ventri feri' exclamavit multisque vulneribus confecta est.* "Now when the centurion drew his sword for the death, extending out her womb she cried out 'strike the belly!' and she was killed with many blows."

⁵⁰ Immediately prior to Britannicus' murder, Agrippina threatens Nero with the possibility of placing Britannicus in power, Tac. Ann. 13.14. Nero's deposition of Britannicus therefore strips Agrippina of her tool to keep Nero in line, demonstrates the control she had over the control of succession, and the very real concern Nero felt due to Britannicus.

⁵¹ Tac. Ann. 14.3.1–2: *Postrema, ubicumque haberetur, praegravem ratus interficere constituit, hactenus consultans, veneno an ferro vel qua alia vi. Placuitque primo venenum. Sed inter epulas principis si daretur, refero ad casum non poterat tali iam Britannici exitio; et ministros temptare arduum videbatur mulieris usu scelerum adversus insidias intentae; atque ipsa praesumendo remedia munierat corpus.* "Finally, thinking that she would be burdensome, wherever she was kept, he decided to kill her, consulting thus far, whether by poison or sword or some other force. At first poison was pleasing. However, if it would be given during the meals of the princeps, it would not have been able to be referred to chance because of the already such a death of Britannicus; and it seemed difficult to provoke the aids of a woman attentive against plots because of her experience with evil deeds; and she herself had fortified her body by consuming the antidote beforehand."

under Agrippina's control.⁵² Upon deciding to kill her, Nero again wishes to employ *venenum* against another member of the imperial family.⁵³ These two instances demonstrate Nero's reliance upon *venenum* or similarly obscure means to secure his own imperial position. Thus, Tacitus connects Neronian imperial power and *venenum*, a concept which inherently represents the overextension of perverse power.

Nero's use of *venenum* therefore brings him into the discourse of magic, and calls attention to the similarities between the emperor and the stereotype of witches. While it is true that many of these qualities are also standard accusations hurled against bad emperors, the incorporation of *venenum* into the discussion of Nero's actions links him to the wider literary tradition of magic. While Tacitus' characterization of Nero does not perfectly map onto the stereotype of witches, the similarities to these women are visible. Tacitus employs these vestiges of the witch stereotype — the use of *venenum*, participation in nocturnal activities, Nero's femininity, his subjugation to lusts, and corporeal mutilation — in his portrayal of Nero to further critique imperial power, especially under the Julio-Claudians. During this period of the principate, the extent of imperial power was so perverse that a ruler as subversive and subservient as Nero could have power.

⁵² Tac. *Ann.* 13.6.2: *quod subsidium in eo, qui a femina regetur...* “what support is in that man, who is ruled by a woman...”; 14.1.3: *cupientibus cunctis infringi potentiam matris et credente nullo usque ad caedem eius duratura filii odia*. “With everyone desiring that the power of his (Nero's) mother be broken and with no one believing that the hatred of the son would continue all the way to death.”; The very way that Tacitus introduces Nero's reign in 13.1.1, with a murder carried out by Agrippina without Nero's knowledge, demonstrates Nero's subjection to his mother.

⁵³ It is worth noting an earlier attempt to remove Agrippina, which Nero supported, by means of a judicial case. In 13.19–21 A select group of Agrippina's enemies, led by Silana, spread the rumor that Agrippina had encouraged Rubellius Plautus into revolution. However, despite Nero's desire to use this case as a way to kill her, Agrippina is able to foil this plot and win her legal case. Thus, an early attempt to kill Agrippina, which Nero fully supported, failed.

Conclusion

Tacitus utilizes *venenum* and its connotations to highlight the perversity of the Julio-Claudians, albeit in different ways. The masculine fears embodied in magic are made manifest in the figure of Agrippina. She perfectly embodies the masculine fears over the transgression of social boundaries lack of male control which creates the negative connotation of magic within Roman literature. Tacitus calls attention to the extent of Agrippina's power, power which would have been unacceptable and terrifying within standard Roman societal values, while also highlighting the lack of control Nero had. Moreover, Tacitus clearly links the succession of imperial power under these later Julio-Claudians to *venenum*. Claudius and Britannicus were both victims of *venenum* and people who possessed the strongest ability to change the line of succession. With Agrippina, the features of a witch were unnecessary additions to her portrayal. Magic usually represents the transgression of social boundaries in a very metaphorical way, but Agrippina's power so obviously already overextended itself in every aspect of Roman life that it did not need the reinforcement of the metaphorical representation. Agrippina's use of *venenum* was another facet of her transgressing the bounds of socially acceptable feminine power. It strengthened her portrayal as a manifestation of masculine fears of what may occur when women have power, but it is not the sole aspect of her perverse power.

Nero's use of *venenum* retains its literary and metaphorical significance and therefore clearly links Nero and his portrayal in Tacitus to the larger literary tradition of magic. It is an attestation of the other failings of Nero's character and reign. As *princeps*, the actions he employs on an individual level extend to the entirety of the state. In using *venenum*, Nero has corrupted not just himself or the imperial family, but all of Rome. Stratton argues that corporeal mutilation in accounts of magic are representative of the violation of social bodies (2014, 160–

72), and that is exactly what Tacitus indicates through this characterization of Nero. Nero's very use of *venenum* demonstrates the various failings of imperial power prevalent throughout the reign of the Julio-Claudians.

Chapter 2: *Venenum* Against the Heir: The Deaths of Drusus and Germanicus

Introduction

The Tiberian *Annales* contain their fair share of accusations of *venenum*, but two accounts of murder stand out for further analysis: Sejanus' use of *venenum* against Drusus (*Ann.* 4.8.1–2) and the use of *venenum* and *malefica* in the death of Germanicus (*Ann.* 2.69.3). Unlike the accounts evaluated in the second chapter, the primary agents in these accounts are peripheral to the imperial family. Since the events of these accounts occurred during the early period of the *Annales* and the principate, they demonstrate the progression of the potency of *venenum* both within the framework of the *Annales* and during the changing political system, in which the death of one individual has a significant impact on the political dynamics. In this chapter I will consider how the figures of Sejanus and Piso employ *venenum* as well as examine how their use of *venenum* contributes to their characterization, which ultimately critiques both Tiberius and the Julio-Claudian imperial system.

Sejanus Against Drusus

I. The Plot

During his lifetime Sejanus, the infamous praetorian prefect, came close to gaining imperial power and employed various methods in his attempts to do so.⁵⁴ His friendship with Tiberius and station within Rome afforded him impressive command, yet his feud with Tiberius' son Drusus posed a threat to him and his aims at official *imperium*.⁵⁵ In Book 4, Sejanus decides to kill Drusus through *venenum*. As Tacitus recounts,

⁵⁴ For recent biographical work on Sejanus, see John McHugh (2020). Champlin (2010) discusses Sejanus' characterization within the ancient texts, and his power in relation to Tiberius.

⁵⁵ Drusus and Sejanus had a previously established animosity, and the two men had recently gotten into an altercation which resulted in Drusus hitting Sejanus. Tac. *Ann.* 3.4.2.

igitur Seianus maturandum ratus deligit venenum, quo paulatim inrepente fortuitus morbus adsimularetur. id Druso datum per Lygdum spadonem, ut octo post annos cognitum est. ceterum Tiberius per omnes valetudinis eius dies, nullo metu an ut firmitudinem animi ostentaret, etiam defuncto necdum sepulto, curiam ingressus est. (*Ann.* 4.8.1–2)

Therefore Sejanus, thinking it [the death of Drusus] must be hastened, picked out a *venenum* by which, creeping in little by little, a chance sickness is emulated. This was given to Drusus through the eunuch Lygdus, as was learned after eight years. But Tiberius through every day of his sickness, with no fear or that he might show firmness of spirit, even with the dead body having been not yet buried, attended the *curia*.

Sejanus' use of *venenum* for lethal ends enters him in the discourse of magic and contributes to his unflattering characterization as it calls attention to his witch-like attributes. Sejanus, who already possessed a concerning amount of command, employed underhanded methods to further his power. The plot begins with Sejanus' corruption of Livilla, Drusus' wife. Sejanus seduces Livilla in the hopes of turning her against Drusus and ultimately gaining greater command, "he compelled her to the hope of marriage, fellowship of the empire, and the death of her husband" (*ad coniugii spem, consortium regni et necem mariti impulit*).⁵⁶ Sexual deviancy is closely associated with magic and adultery — especially adultery as a gateway to further corruption — certainly falls within the category of perverse sexuality (Stratton 2014, 161–4). Livilla's seduction represents the changing power dynamics magic often creates: the woman (Livilla) transgresses the standard bounds of social propriety and the man (Drusus) suffers a loss of power and, here, life. Sejanus, however, is in control of Livilla throughout these events, a fact

⁵⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 4.3.3: *igitur cuncta temptanti promptissimum visum ad uxorem eius Liviam convertere, quae soror Germanici, formae initio aetatis indecorae, mox pulchritudine praecebat. hanc ut amore incensus adulterio pellexit, et postquam primi flagitii potitus est (neque femina amissa pudicitia alia abnuerit), ad coniugii spem, consortium regni et necem mariti impulit.* "Therefore it seemed most easy for trying everything to turn to his [Drusus'] wife, Livilla, who was the sister of Germanicus, in her early age she was of unseemly appearance, now she excelled in beauty. He, as though inflamed with love, impelled this woman to adultery, and after he acquired the first shameful act (for a woman, with her shame having been lost, will not have denied anything), he compelled her to the hope of marriage, fellowship of the empire, and the death of her husband." Livilla was a nickname for Livia, and for the purposes of this work she will be referred to as Livilla to differentiate her from Livia, the wife of Augustus.

which adds a layer of scariness to his role. Sejanus additionally seduces and manipulates the eunuch Lydgus, who ultimately administers the *venenum* to Drusus. “When Livia had been corrupted for the crime, Sejanus also conquered the mind of Lydgus the eunuch with debauchery” (*corrupta ad scelus Livia Seianum Lygdi quoque spadonis animum stupro vinxisse* 4.10.2). Sejanus therefore primarily relies on two common practices of literary witches — sexual deviancy and *venenum* — in his plot.⁵⁷ His use of the eunuch Lydgus as poisoner heightens the uncanny aspects of these events and engages with the gendered connotation within literary depictions of witchcraft. As a eunuch, Lydgus expressly occupies the liminal space between male and female.⁵⁸ His involvement in the crime both acknowledges the inherently gendered connotation of *venenum* and emphasizes the liminality of this event. These acts transgress acceptable societal bounds and subvert what would be expected from a leading Roman and are more characteristic of witches than of a good Roman statesman.

While the very use of *venenum* has clear ties to witchcraft, the type of poison Sejanus selects magnifies the repugnance of Sejanus and his actions in this account. Sejanus selects a *venenum* which replicates a sickness “by creeping in little by little” (*paulatim inrepente* 4.8.1). Sejanus is crafty and cruel in his choice of a type of *venenum* which acts slowly, drawing out Drusus’ death, so that it may be mistaken as a sickness. This type of *venenum* adds an additional layer of deceit to the murder: Sejanus opts to prolong the suffering of Drusus in order to hide his deed. The antagonistic insinuation of *venenum* and the images it conjures up of the scary and evil

⁵⁷ Adultery and *venenum* are often connected crimes, but usually committed by women, see Pollard (2014) for a commentary on the interconnectedness of these two concepts within Tacitus’ *Annales*. Santoro L’Hoir (2009) discusses the transgression of social boundaries within Tacitus’ *Annales*, and how *venenum* is typically associated with inappropriate possession of power.

⁵⁸ For recent work on eunuchs within Rome, see Tougher (2020). Eunuchs embodied the sense of liminality, both foreign and commonplace, male yet female, their presence in the imperial court was to be expected. As Tougher discusses, the idea of eunuchs in Roman society, much like magic, came to embody larger themes of power, slavery, religion, and gender.

witches found in Roman literature, contributes to the negative characterization of Sejanus. He is not only conniving, but also willing to employ perverse and unnatural methods to manipulate events in the ultimate hopes that he will maintain and increase power.

Sejanus exhibits similarities to literary witches in additional aspects of his characterization, as an analysis of the resemblances between Sejanus and the witch stereotype will demonstrate. He is not a woman, but Tacitus does bring his masculinity into question through the charge of *stuprum*, “not without the rumor that he gave for sale debauchery to the wealthy and lavish Apicius” (*non sine rumore Apicio diviti et prodigo stuprum veno dedisse* 4.1.2).⁵⁹ As praetorian prefect, Sejanus occupied a prominent position within the imperial system, a fact which would minimize his liminality. However, he was an equestrian from outside of Rome, so his lofty position within the Tiberian administration would have seemed inappropriate to Roman senatorial elites (McHugh 2020, 3–4). Most notably, Sejanus, like many literary witches, bends the laws of nature and society in procuring his power.⁶⁰ His actions are deliberately deadly, he embarks upon them for selfish reasons, and he uses *venenum* as his uncanny tool. Sejanus is therefore similar to these fictional witches in his actions and intentions, and he therefore becomes implicative of the larger literary tradition of magic. Through the word *venenum*, Tacitus conjures up images of socially unacceptable acts and the sense of abjection for his audience, and he attaches these feelings of grotesque depravity to Sejanus, the originator of

⁵⁹ Tacitus uses the same word in his discussion of Lydus’ seduction, see *Ann.* 4.10.2. Goldberg (2020), 99–103 discusses manliness (*virtus*) in ancient Rome and its perceived decline during the early empire.

⁶⁰ Unlike both Agrippina and Nero, who were aided by Locusta, and Piso and Plancina, aided by Martina, Sejanus is the primary agent in this murder. There is no feminine witch figure in Sejanus’ poisoning of Drusus. Rather, the deed is carried out through his own cunning and ability to manipulate both Livia and Lydus (and also, according to rumor, Tiberius). Sejanus’ account therefore lacks significant female involvement, contradicting the standard gendered association of *venenum*.

the crime. This link to magic and these stereotypes heightens the visibility of these degenerate qualities within Sejanus.

Tacitus' depiction of Sejanus also resembles a different *topos*, that of the Roman enemy, which further contributes to his similarities with literary witches. At the beginning of Book 4, Tacitus offers a biographical description of Sejanus:

corpus illi laborum tolerans, animus audax; sui obtegens, in alios crimator; iuxta adulatio et superbia; palam compositus pudor, intus summa apiscendi libido, eiusque causa modo largitio et luxus, saepius industria ac vigilantia, haud minus noxae, quotiens parando regno finguntur. (Tac. *Ann.* 4.1.3)

His body was enduring of labors, his mind was daring; he was protective of himself, an accuser against others; openly shame was cultivated, internally there was the greatest desire for possessing, because of this free-spending and extravagance, more often than diligence and watchfulness, no less crimes, whenever they were created for contriving dominion.

Tacitus' portrait of Sejanus greatly resembles Sallust's Catiline:⁶¹

corpus patiens inediae, algoris, vigiliae, supra quam cuiquam credibile est. animus audax, subdolos, varius, cuius rei lubet simulator as dissimulator; alieni adpetens, sui profusus; ardens in cupiditatibus; satis eloquentiae, sapientiae parum. vastus animus inmoderata, incredibilia, nimis alta semper cupiebat. hunc post dominationem L. Sullae libido maxuma invaserat rei publicae capiundae, neque id quibus modis adsequeretur, dum sibi regnum pararet, quicquam pensi habebat...incitabant praeterea corrupti civitatis mores, quos pessuma ac divorsa inter se mala, luxuria atque avaritia, vexabant. (Sal. *Bell. Cat.* 5.3–8)

His body was enduring of hunger, cold, and wakefulness, more than anyone would believe. His mind was daring, deceitful, varied, a pretender and concealer of which thing was pleasing; seeking another's possessions, pouring out his own; burning in desires, a man of enough eloquence but too little wisdom. His immense mind was always desiring immoderate, unbelievable, and excessively lofty things. After the dominion of L. Sulla, the greatest desire for seizing the republic entered this man, and he did not consider it of any importance by which way he achieved it, provided that he prepare dominion for himself... additionally the character of the corrupt state, which the worst and different amongst themselves ills, extravagance and greed, was stirring up, was inciting him.

⁶¹ For recent work on this popular intertext, see Feldherr (2010) and O'Gorman (2010). O'Gorman (2009) offers a broader overview of intertextuality in historiography and explores this connection as one of her examples.

The language in these two sections is strikingly similar. The men are described as *audax*, and their bodies are enduring (*tolerans, patiens*) of various harsh conditions. Catiline and Sejanus both have the greatest desire (*summa libido, libido maxuma*) of gaining power. Tacitus not only uses the same word for desire, *libido*, as Sallust, he also accompanies it with a genitive gerund, mirroring Sallust's genitive gerundive. Notably, when discussing Sejanus' and Catiline's desire for control over Rome, both Tacitus and Sallust use the words *regnum* and *paro*. Through this diction, Tacitus calls into his readers' minds Catiline, as well as Hannibal, thanks to an additional layer of intertext contained in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*,⁶² and places Sejanus amongst the ranks of Rome's notable enemies.⁶³

Yet Sejanus surpasses these infamous Roman villains, as neither Catiline nor Hannibal ever employed *venenum*. Sejanus alone resorts to such extreme measures, pushing his treacheries even further beyond the bounds of previous notorious Roman enemies. Thus, in his use of *venenum* and similarly witchy actions, Sejanus surpasses these infamous villains. His association with Catiline and Hannibal likewise forces him into a place of liminality, in which he subverts the standard boundaries of Roman law and power, as magic often does. The connection between *venenum* as a type of magic and the perversity of Sejanus' power is thus mutually reinforcing. Sejanus utilizes *venenum* because of his character flaws, and at the same time his use of *venenum*

⁶² Livy *Ab Urbe* 21.4.5–7: *Plurimum audaciae ad pericula capessenda, plurimum consilii inter ipsa pericula erat. nullo labore aut corpus fatigari aut animus vinci poterat. Caloris ac frigoris patientia par; cibi potionisque desiderio naturali, non voluptate modus finitus; vigiliarum somnique nec die nec nocte discriminata tempora; id quod gerendis rebus superesset quieti datum...* “There was the most daring for seizing dangers, and the most deliberation among the dangers themselves. His body was not able to be worn out by any labor nor was his mind about to be conquered. He has equal endurance of heat and cold; his stopping point of eating and drinking by natural desire, not pleasure; the times for waking and sleeping were determined not by night or day; that which was left over from doing things was given to rest.”

⁶³ Sejanus acts similar to Catiline in other respects, i.e.: Sejanus' seduction of Livia parallels Catiline's seduction of Sempronia, Sall. *Bell. Cat.* 25.

calls attention to these larger issues in Sejanus' character and grasps at power. Sejanus' characterization as an enemy therefore further solidifies his image as a witch.

The overall unfavorable characterization of Sejanus ultimately reflects on and critiques Tiberius and the imperial system. The fact that Tiberius allowed someone as dangerous and power-hungry as Sejanus to rise so close to imperial power and hold such significant sway over him demonstrates Tiberius' faults and the dangers of the principate more generally. Tacitus depicts Tiberius as someone whose character is consistently affected by other people, and Sejanus is one of these people.⁶⁴ Sejanus had significant influence over Tiberius during most of his tenure as prefect of the praetorian guard, and as such this negative characterization of Sejanus ties to Tiberius' own image. Tacitus illustrates Sejanus' sway over Tiberius at various points in the *Annales*, and states that Sejanus, “[Sejanus] soon conquered Tiberius by various arts, so that he made Tiberius reserved against others and uncautious and unguarded to him [Sejanus] alone” (*mox Tiberium variis artibus devinxit, adeo ut obscurum adversum alios sibi uni incautum intectumque efficeret* 4.1.2). The rumor attached to the death of Drusus demonstrates the effects of Sejanus' influence on Tiberius. Even though Tacitus refutes this rumor, it still illustrates the hazards of Sejanus' influence on Tiberius, and the dangers of someone like Tiberius as *princeps*.

⁶⁴Tac. Ann. 6.51.3: *morum quoque tempora illi diversa: egregium vita famaue, quoad privatus vel in imperiis sub Augusto fuit; occultum ac subdolum figendis virtutibus, donec Germanicus ac Drusus superfuere; idem inter bona malaque mixtus incolumi matre; instabilis saevitia, sed obtectis libidinibus, dum Seianum dilexit timuitve: postremo in scelera simul ac dedecora prorupit, postquam remoto pudore et metu suo tantum ingenio utebatur.* “The seasons of his [Tiberius'] character were opposite: he was outstanding in life and fame, as long as he was a private citizen or under the power of Augustus; he was secretive and crafty by feigning virtues, while Germanicus and Drusus survived, the same man was mixed between good and bad when he mother was living, he had infamous rage, but with his desires having been concealed, while he esteemed or feared Sejanus: finally he rushed into evil acts and shameful deeds at the same time, after with his shame and fear having been removed he was using only his own nature.” Woodman (1998) and Goodyear (1970) both offer analyses of this comment.

II. *The Rumor*

Tacitus complicates the narrative by recounting a rumor of Sejanus' trickery. As this report is integral to understanding Tacitus' critique of Tiberius, let us turn now to evaluate the story that Tacitus recounts concerning the poisoning of Drusus. This rumor, which Tacitus is careful to signal as such, states that Sejanus informed Tiberius that Drusus intended to poison him, and therefore at a banquet Tiberius himself handed an unknowing Drusus the poisoned cup, thinking that Drusus had intended to kill him with it.

... et occulto indicio Drusum veneni in patrem arguens moneret Tiberium vitandam potionem, quae prima ei apud filium epulanti offerrentur. ea fraude captum senem, postquam convivium inierat, exceptum poculum Druso tradidisse, atque illo ignaro et iuveniliter hauriente auctam suspicionem, tamquam metu et pudore sibimet inrogaret mortem, quam patri struxerat. (*Ann.* 4.10.2–3)

He [Sejanus], accusing, with secret information, Drusus of poison against his father, warned Tiberius that the drink which is offered first to him dining in the presence of his son, must be avoided. The old man was deceived by this lie, after he had entered the banquet, with the cup having been taken he passed it to Drusus, and suspicion increased by that man unknowing and youthfully draining the cup dry, as though because of fear and shame he inflicted upon himself death, which he had built for his father.

Tiberius' involvement in this rumor contributes to Tacitus' portrayal of him as an inept ruler and accentuates Tacitus' commentary on imperial power. As Tacitus crafts this portrayal of Drusus' death, supposedly at Sejanus' hand, Tiberius is the featured character.⁶⁵ Tacitus focalizes Tiberius during this moment, and instead of recounting Drusus' death, he reports Tiberius' actions throughout Drusus' sickness. Tacitus describes how Tiberius continued attending Senate meetings even during the dire parts of Drusus' sickness and after his death (4.8–9). Tacitus then reports the rumor, which makes Tiberius the one who directly hands Drusus the *venenum*. Thus, while Tiberius was not the one who initially made the decision to kill Drusus, he did, with full

⁶⁵Feldherr (2009) is primarily concerned with Tacitus' use of rumor in the account of Drusus' death, but he also aptly indicates the central role Tacitus casts Tiberius in.

knowledge, give his son the poisoned cup. Through this rumor, Tacitus makes Tiberius an integral player in Drusus' death.

An analysis of the focality of Tiberius within this account will demonstrate aspects of Tacitean characterization of Tiberius, especially his depiction of Tiberius as a tyrant. While Sejanus is the originator of the poisoning, through centering Tiberius, Tacitus creates a narrative in which Tiberius is the one whose actions are scrutinized. These actions coincide well with the common stereotype of the tyrant — a mold which Tacitus often forces Tiberius into.⁶⁶ Again, just as in his depiction of Sejanus, Tacitus incorporates known literary stereotypes into his account of these events. It is in character for a tyrant to poison those who may challenge his rule, which is exactly how Sejanus frames Drusus' alleged poisoning.⁶⁷ Even though Tacitus does deliberately refute this rumor, by even just recounting it, he suggests to his audience a connection — and potential culpability — between Tiberius and Drusus's death.⁶⁸ However, it is important to note that Tacitus never questions Sejanus' role in killing Drusus.⁶⁹ When Tacitus ties Tiberius to this poisoning and attributes to him a partially active role, he creates a more cohesive image of Tiberius in the role of the standard tyrant.

⁶⁶ Walker (1952), see especially "Type Character in the *Annales*." In this chapter, Walker discusses Tacitus' use of stock characters, paying special attention to his portrayal of Tiberius as a tyrant, and comments on how Tacitus at times forces people to fit the description of the stock character even if they have conflicting traits. Dunkle (1971) additionally contextualizes the stereotype of the tyrant within ancient literature and considers Tacitus' employment of the figure.

⁶⁷ Walker (1952), 204–15. Walker goes through the common attributes of tyrants as stock characters, including a constant fear of conspiracy. Tyrannical paranoia is evident within this account, and Tiberius' belief of Sejanus.

⁶⁸ See Ryberg (1942) for a discussion on innuendo in Tacitus.

⁶⁹ *Tac. Ann.* 4.10.1: *in tradenda morte Drusi quae plurimis maximaeque fidei auctoribus memorata sunt rettuli: set non omiserim eorundem temporum rumorem, validum adeo, ut nondum exolescat.* "In handing down the death of Germanicus, I recounted which things are recounted by authors of the greatest faith: but I should not omit a rumor of those same times, still strong, so that it has not yet died out." Rumors are an important aspect of Tacitus' methodology. Many scholars have analyzed Tacitus' use of rumors within his writings. Gibson (1998) traces the ways in which rumors can have a certain amount of agency within Tacitus' works. Schatzman (1974) analyzes how rumors could be used when factual information was lacking. Goodyear (1970) comments on the prevalence of rumors in Tacitus' misrepresentation of Tiberius.

The strength of the rumor, which Tacitus describes as “still strong” (*validum adeo*), is evidence of Sejanus’ influence over Tiberius and the larger consequences of Sejanus’ use of *venenum*. Even though Tacitus is careful to refute the rumor, it was still something that was believed at the time, so much so that it persisted until Tacitus’ time.⁷⁰ Tacitus states that the rumor persisted because, “but because Sejanus was considered the inventor of all crimes, from excessive affection of Caesar for him and hatred of others against both men, although incredible and monstrous these things were believed” (*sed quia Seianus facinorum omnium repertor habebatur, ex nimia caritate in eum Caesaris et ceterorum in utrumque odio quamvis fabulosa et immania credebantur* 4.11.2). The popular belief highlights the full extent of Sejanus’ perceived power over Tiberius. The death of Drusus thus represents the extent of collateral damage due to Sejanus’ influence. Again, Sejanus’ actions and influence ultimately comment upon Tiberius. The people of Rome believed that Tiberius was so easily convinced to turn against his own son at the behest of Sejanus, a fact which illuminates Tiberius’ character. Even though Tacitus repeatedly emphasizes that this aspect of the story is solely a rumor, its presence within the narrative speaks volumes about Tiberius’ tyrannical nature and the harmful consequences of Sejanus’ presence in the imperial institution.

As this account shows, Tacitus portrays Sejanus and his use of *venenum* as indications of the larger flaws in the imperial system under Tiberius. Sejanus was power hungry and willing to use any means necessary to gain power. The presence of *venenum* here both ties Sejanus into the larger literary discourse of magic, and also highlights the spooky nature of Sejanus’ power and the extent of his control over Tiberius. Tiberius’ tendency to be influenced by those around him,

⁷⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 4.11.1: *haec vulgo iactata super id, quod nullo auctore certo firmantur, prompte refutaveris.* “this rumor having been spread everywhere about this, which is confirmed by no credible author, one would readily refute.”

and his tendency to place those in power who are corrupt, power hungry, and downright evil, demonstrates failings not just in the character of the *princeps*, but the imperial system more broadly.

Piso and Plancina: The Death of Germanicus

Drusus is not the only Julio-Claudian heir whose death may have been due to *venenum*, as Tacitus recounts that *venenum* and *malefica* likewise play a prominent but uncertain role in Germanicus' demise. Therefore, let us turn now to examine Tacitus' account of the death of Germanicus, which is the lengthiest depiction of magic, including *venenum*, within the *Annales*. In this section, I will first evaluate Tacitus' account of the magical objects and demonstrate how this passage firmly situates him within the larger discourse of magic. Then, I will consider how Tacitus discusses gendered power, which is closely related to *venenum*, as a critique of the imperial structure. Finally, an evaluation of the persons of Piso and Tiberius will lead to a discussion of the flaws within the Tiberian principate.

I. The Magic Materials

The description of *malefica* in Germanicus' death explicitly interacts with the larger discourse of magic within Roman literature. Prior to this description of various magical objects reportedly found in Germanicus' headquarters, Tacitus establishes the political and military tensions between Germanicus and Piso. Germanicus soon falls ill and believes that Piso is responsible, as recorded in Book 2 of the *Annales*:

saevam vim morbi augebat persuasio veneni a Pisone accepti; et reperiabantur solo ac parietibus erutae humanorum corporum reliquiae, carmina et devotiones et nomen Germanici plumbeis tabulis insculptum, semusti cineres ac tabo obliti aliaque malefica quis creditur animas numinibus infernis sacrari. simul missi a Pisone incusabantur ut valetudinis adversa rimantes. (*Ann.* 2.69.3)

A conviction of being the recipient of a potion from Piso was increasing the fierce strength of his sickness; and the dug up remains of human bodies, incantations and

curses, and the name of Germanicus inscribed on lead tablets were all found in the ground and the walls, and ashes, half-burnt and smeared with foul matter, and other sorceries by which it is believed that souls are consecrated to the infernal deities. At the same time men sent by Piso were accused of prying into the sickness.

In this passage, Tacitus describes the *malefica* in a highly literary way, which demonstrates his interaction with the literary discourse of magic instead of magic as it was practiced in actuality.⁷¹

Tacitus' catalog of the magical objects does not coincide with the archaeological record. The location of magical objects within the walls of the tent provides complications. Curse tablets, as they were generally dedicated to infernal deities, needed to be deposited in places connected to chthonic deities (Edmonds 2019, 64–5; Ogden 2008, 139). Primary chthonic locations include temples to Demeter, wells with nymphs, burial with a dead body, or crossroads, which were frequently associated with Hecate, but not the walls of your enemy's abode (Matysak 2019, 94–108). The plethora of magic items listed as responsible for Germanicus' death distinctly demonstrate that Tacitus did not model this description of *malefica* on actual ritual practices.

Similarly, while there is limited archaeological evidence, supplemented by textual evidence, which suggests that animal remains may have been used in tandem with curse tablets, there is no credible discussion of human remains ever used in a similar ritualistic practice (Edmonds 2019, 64). Tacitus nevertheless lists human remains (*erutae humanorum corporum reliquiae*) among the magical objects found in the walls of Germanicus' abode. Here, Tacitus is clearly engaging in the literary tradition of witchcraft, as seen in characters such as Meroe in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, Erictho in Lucan's *Pharsalia*, and Horace's Canidia. These literary witches all utilize mutilated human corpses in various spells and incantations, as well as

⁷¹ Spaeth (2014), Stratton (2014), and Pollard (2014), as discussed in the introductory chapter, all conceptualize this literary discourse within Greco-Roman antiquity. Stratton points out that the literary portrayals of these practitioners often contrasts with how magic was practiced in actuality. While Stratton is specifically addressing the gendered distribution of practitioners, her observation applies in this account as well, 16–28.

venenum, just as is described in this passage.⁷² Within the Roman literary sphere, magic and magical practitioners are often perverse in nature and create a sense of abjection within the reader. Abjection breeds feelings of unease in the reader, as it reminds them of their own ultimate death, and is closely associated with the breaking down and dissolution of social boundaries.⁷³ As Stratton explains, magic often creates abjection through mutilating the human body in various ways (2014). The mutilation of bodies was an usual feature in the depiction of magical practice within Roman texts and an important facet of the creation of abjection frequently cultivated in depictions of magic.⁷⁴ The mention of human remains is a clear example of this engagement with the abjection of literary magic.

Tacitus' description of *malefica*, due to its engagement with the larger literary tradition, conveys aspects of the social connotations and taboos cultivated within the literary discourse of magic. His involvement with the larger literary tradition creates an association between the actors of this account — Piso, Plancina, and even Tiberius — and the fictional practitioners of magic. This association brings with it the negative baggage of magic as a socially taboo practice, and an underhanded way to gain power. Through this report of magical objects, Tacitus summons images of these notorious magical practitioners from the larger literary tradition. These images color the reader's interpretation of the subsequent actions of every player within this account.

⁷² *Vid.* note 27. Canidia and her fellow witches steal bones in Horace *Satire* 1.8 and kill a young boy to use his flesh in a potion in *Epode* 5; Lucan, *Phars.* 6.529–568: provides a lengthy description of Erictho defiling the dead and dying to harvest parts of their body

⁷³ Stratton (2014) thoroughly defines and discusses the concept of abjection, and the disturbed feeling it often creates, within the Roman stereotype of the witch.

⁷⁴ The idea that a corpse would be within the walls of one's habitation would have been jarring for Romans, as they refused to even have dead bodies buried within the city boundaries. Furthermore, Romans were vehemently opposed to human sacrifice and, although they would not often force their religion on conquered peoples, they did prohibit any form of human sacrifice or use of human remains in religious rituals across the empire. For more on Roman attitudes towards the dead, specifically in the context of ritual practice, see Ogden (2019).

II. Gender and Power

Tacitus' commentary on perverse power and its overextension during the Julio-Claudian principate includes his discussion of Plancina and Livia's behind-the-scenes contrivances.

Plancina is actively involved in the supposed murder, and her actions throughout this account demonstrate her lack of concern for adhering to the status quo.⁷⁵ Tacitus portrays the public opinion of Plancina as markedly negative, and states that she was also viewed as responsible for Germanicus' death. Germanicus, upon his deathbed, remarks that he is, "taken away by the wickedness of Piso and Plancina" (*nunc scelere Pisonis et Plancinae interceptus* 2.71.1).

Plancina's actions stir up hatred amongst the Germanicus-loving Roman public. She travels with an envoy of women as a part of Piso's jubilant procession to Rome, and, upon Germanicus' death suspiciously ended her period of mourning for her sister and changed out of her mourning clothing.⁷⁶ This behavior shows a clear disregard for Germanicus' death and cements ill-will within the Roman aristocracy. According to Tacitus' literary concept of *malefica*, Plancina is exactly the sort of woman, the kind that disregards socially acceptable behavior, who would use *venenum* and other *malefica* to secure power and prominence for her family.

The most damaging aspect of Plancina's behavior, in connection to Germanicus' death, is her friendship with Martina, which provides evidence of involvement in Germanicus' murder.

Martina was "a woman infamous in the province because of these poisonings and very dear to

⁷⁵ Prior to Germanicus' death, Plancina was already surpassing the bounds of acceptable feminine behavior. Tac. *Ann.* 2.55.6: *nec Plancina se intra decora feminis tenebat, sed exercitio equitum, decursibus cohortium interesse, in Agrippinam, in Germanicum contumelias iacere....* "Nor was Plancina containing herself within the feminine dignities, but she was present at the practice of the equites and the maneuvers of the cohorts, she threw insults against Agrippina and Germanicus..."

⁷⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 3.9.2: *feminarum comitatu Plancina et vultu alacres incessere.* "Plancina, with her company of women, marched along cheerful in face."; 2.75.2: *neque ipse gaudium moderans et magis insolescente Plancina, quae luctum amissae sororis tum primum laeto culto mutavit.* "Nor was he (Piso) himself moderating his joy and with Plancina being very insolent, who then at first exchanged the mourning for her sister for joyful dress."

Plancina” (*isque infamem veneficiis ea in provincia et Plancinae percarum*).⁷⁷ When compiling the case against Piso, Marsus, the governor of Syria, sent Martina to Rome, at the request of Vitellius and Veranius. This action indicates that Plancina’s association with Martina was evidence which could be used against Piso. Martina was only connected to Piso through her close association with Plancina. In fact, Plancina’s friendship with Martina is the closest that Tacitus’ narrative ever gets to explicitly stating that Plancina or Piso murdered Germanicus. This relationship is further complicated when Martina dies on her way to Rome. As Tacitus recounts:

...erectis omnium animis petendae e Pisone ultionis et crebro questu, quod vagus interim per amoena Asiae atque Achaiae adroganti et subdola mora scelerum probationes subverteret. nam vulgatum erat missam, ut dixi, a Cn. Sentio famosam veneficiis Martinam subita morte Brundisii exstinctam, venenumque nodo crinium eius occultatum, nec ulla in corpore signa sumpti exitii reperta. (*Ann.* 3.7.2)

...With everyone’s minds having been lifted up by seeking retribution from Piso and with the common compliant, because meanwhile he, wandering through the pleasant places of Asia and Achaia, destroyed evidence of his wicked deeds by an insolent and deceitful delay. For it had been spread around that Martina, famous for *veneficia*, having been sent, as I said, by Gnaeus Sentius, was killed by a sudden death in Brundisium, and *venenum* was hidden in a knot of her hair, but no other signs of self-inflicted death were found on her body.

Martina’s death suggests that Piso was destroying the evidence of his crimes. There were no signs that the death was self-inflicted, a fact which strengthens the idea that Piso was tying up loose ends. Martina’s death thus solidifies the culpability of Piso and Plancina in Germanicus’ murder. Therefore, the clearest piece of “evidence” linking Germanicus’ death to Piso is through his wife and a witch.

⁷⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 2.74.2: *isque infamem veneficiis ea in provincia et Plancinae percarum nomine Martinam in urbem misit, postulantibus Vitellio ac Veranio ceterisque, qui crimina et accusationem tamquam adversus receptos iam reos instruebant.* “And he sent into the city a woman infamous in the province because of these poisonings and very dear to Plancina, by the name Martina, with Vitellius and Veranius and the others prosecuting, who were preparing the charges and indictment although the accused were already received.”

Plancina's friendship with Martina also incorporates her into the literary discourse of witches, and calls Plancina's character into question. The image of Martina's dead body, with poison wrapped in her hair, is familiar imagery within the literary depiction of witches, and Tacitus employs this imagery to solidify Martina's role as a witch. He states that "*venenum* was hidden in a knot of her hair" (*venenumque nodo crinium eius occultatum* 3.7.2). The image of *venenum* knotted up in Martina's hair is reminiscent of other physical descriptions of witches: "Canidia, her hair bound with small vipers and disheveled head" (*Canidia, brevibus illigata viperis/crinis et incomptum caput* Hor. *Ep.* 5.15–6), and Lucan describes Erictho's face as "burdened with her uncombed hair" (*inpexis onerata comis Phars.* 6.518). Aside from her skill with *venenum* and companionship with Plancina, Tacitus does not offer many details about Martina. Instead, Martina functions more as a tool of Plancina and Piso, as evidenced by the blame that Plancina and Piso accrue for the murder of Germanicus, instead of Martina.⁷⁸ Plancina herself does not exhibit many of the qualities of witches, and unlike Martina, Plancina never explicitly employs *venenum* or other types of *malefica*. It is her relationship with Martina which enters Plancina within this discourse of magic. Plancina cultivates a close friendship with her, so much so that Martina is described not just as dear to Plancina, but very dear (*percarum* 2.74.2). Martina's brief characterization by Tacitus cements her role in the reader's mind as an experienced witch, and her connection to Plancina comments on Plancina's character. Plancina willingly associates with a woman about whom little is stated but, through the witch stereotype, much is imagined. In her friendship with Martina, Plancina reveals that she is comfortable associating with witches, leaving the audience to speculate on what else she would be comfortable with.

⁷⁸ Agrippina the Younger and Nero similarly utilize Locusta as an *instrumentum regni* and yet retain the guilt for their respective murders, see *Ann.* 12.66; 13.15.

Livia's association with Plancina exhibits the overextension of feminine power within the privatized Julio-Claudian principate.⁷⁹ It is this woman who appears to deliberately antagonize the memory of Germanicus and openly associates with a famous witch, whom Livia makes specific efforts to protect. Much like how Plancina's association with Martina reflects poorly on her, so too does Livia's association with Plancina reflect poorly on the empress. The associations that these women have with each other demonstrate the perversity of their characters, and Tacitus creates a depiction for the reader of a group of amoral, witchy women plotting to increase their power and manipulate imperial affairs. The vileness of Plancina emphasizes the corruption of Livia. What is more concerning to Tacitus, though, is the extent to which Livia was able to intervene on Plancina's behalf, which demonstrates the range of female power during the Julio-Claudian principate. As Tacitus describes events, the elites of Rome hated Plancina, yet she never faced any charges during her husband's trial. Plancina's friendship with Livia lent her a level of protection: "Plancina had the same hatred, but greater influence: and so it was considered unsure how far it was permitted for Caesar to go against her" (*eadem Plancinae invidia, maior gratia; eoque ambiguum habebatur, quantum Caesari in eam liceret* 3.15.1). Livia was able to intercede and Plancina never faced any official penalties: "when she obtained a pardon by the secret entreaties of Augusta." (*ut secretis Augustae precibus veniam obtinuit* 3.15.1). It is these *secretis precibus* of Livia which embody the issue with gendered power during the Julio-Claudian principate. The system allowed the women close to the *princeps* to have their own amount of influence, but only through secret maneuverings and actions behind closed doors. Livia takes full advantage of this system, and to help people like Plancina. Livia's intercession within this account reflects poorly on her and the imperial administration she had control over.

⁷⁹ Bauman 1992 discusses the role of women at different points in Roman history, which provides useful contextualization for the changing role of women within the principate.

An evaluation of the factional in-fighting between the different branches of the Julio-Claudian family, which most often expressed itself in female rivalries, demonstrates further aspects of Tacitus' critique of gendered power under the Julio-Claudians.⁸⁰ Livia, in protecting Plancina, strengthens her opposition to Agrippina the Elder, the widow of Germanicus. There was already tension between Livia and Agrippina the Elder, as they represented different branches of the imperial family.⁸¹ Additionally, during these events, Livilla, the wife of Tiberius' son Drusus, gives birth to twins. This birth is seen as a blow to Agrippina, as it increased the house of Drusus shortly after the great loss in the house of Germanicus.⁸² The feminine dominance of this familial infighting demonstrates an integral aspect of the imperial system, as well as Tacitus' critique of it. The women were especially concerned with ensuring that their sons and husbands held important roles, because that was the only way to ensure the dominance and survival of their family.⁸³ Moreover, a proximity to a prominent person was the primary way through which these women achieved power and affluence. While this statement was true during the Republican period, the transformation of the political system under the principate meant that imperial women could now impact affairs. Power became concentrated in the hands of the

⁸⁰ Santoro L'Hoir (2009) analyzes Tacitus' portrayal of the overextension of women's power in the *Annales*. Tacitus talks about women, like Livia, as female usurpers in Rome. McHugh (2012) argues that Tacitus' masculinization of Agrippina the Elder villainizes Sejanus and Tiberius. Pollard (2014) analyzes the prominence of accusations of *venenum*, as a feminine tool, within the larger inter-familial fighting that occurred during the early principate.

⁸¹ Agrippina, as the daughter of Agrippa and Julia, was directly related to Augustus by blood. Livia, however, had no biological children with Augustus, and relied on her sons from her first marriage to maintain the power and status she had held during Augustus' reign.

⁸² Tac. Ann. 2.84: *ceterum recenti adhuc maestitia soror Germanici Livia, nupta Druso, duos virilis sexus simul enixa est...sed populo tali in tempore id quoque dolorem tulit, tamquam auctus liberis Drusus domum Germanici magis urgeret*. "But in the still now recent sadness, Livia, the sister of Germanicus, married to Drusus, gave birth to two boys at the same time...but this also brought pain to the people in such occasion, as Drusus, having increased in children, was more threatening to the house of Germanicus."

⁸³ Corbier (1995) clearly details the ways in which the Julio-Claudian families were structured and the role women played in the transmission of power. As Augustus had no natural sons, connections to him derived from the women in his family. Santoro L'hoir (1994) addresses Tacitus' use of the *dux femina* to juxtapose inappropriate female power within Rome. Rutland (1978) stresses the importance of Julio-Claudian women in keeping the dynastic tradition alive.

princeps, and those close to him. The new role of the *princeps* meant that the women of the imperial household likewise held previously unforeseen amounts of power. The infighting within the imperial power is a symptom of this larger imperial framework, and Tacitus utilizes the fallout after the death of Germanicus to highlight this issue.

III. Piso and Tiberius

Having analyzed the complexities of gendered power dynamics made visible during the aftermath of the death of Germanicus, I will now discuss the figure of Piso and argue that the presence of *venenum* within this account critiques Tiberius and the imperial system. Piso differs from the other figures previously evaluated in this thesis since neither he nor Plancina — unlike Sejanus, Agrippina the Younger, and Nero — are shown making the deliberate decision to kill Germanicus via witchcraft. Tacitus instead depicts the murder as something Germanicus, and then the people of Rome, believed, and in recounting Germanicus' death states that, "conviction of being the recipient of a potion from Piso was increasing the fierce strength of his sickness" (*saevam vim morbi augebat persuasio veneni a Pisoni accepti* 2.69.3). The witnesses to Germanicus' corpse likewise were not able to say with certainty whether he was the victim of *venenum*.⁸⁴ However, Tacitus recounts the discovery of the various magical objects as a fact, the hard evidence to encourage Germanicus' conviction. As it is recorded in Book 2, the only ambiguity is not whether Germanicus was poisoned, but whether Piso was responsible. This episode is an instance of Tacitus' use of innuendo, and the general ambiguity of his language

⁸⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 2.73: *Corpus antequam cremaretur nudatum in foro Antiochensium, qui locus sepulturae destinabatur, praetuleritne uenificii signa parum constitit; nam ut quis misericordia in Germanicum et praesumpta suscipione aut fauor in Pisonem pronior, diuersi interpretabantur.* "The body, before it was cremated, was uncovered in the forum of Antioch, which place was determined for the burial, it was little agreed upon whether the body displayed signs of magic; for people diversely construed it, as some with pity for Germanicus and suspicion taken up or their favor was more inclined to Piso."

leads the reader to make certain assumptions.⁸⁵ Even though Tacitus does not explicitly blame Piso, he offers no alternative culprit, which leaves the reader to conclude that Piso did, in fact, utilize *malefica* to kill Germanicus.

Despite Tacitus' ambiguous attribution of the *malefica* to Piso, the allegation of *venenum* was the only charge on which Piso was acquitted, which reveals the political connotations of *venenum* within these circumstances.⁸⁶ The Senate's verdict shows that the Senate was more concerned with Piso's political schemings. Piso was angling for more power for himself, and prior to Germanicus' death, Piso explicitly disobeyed Germanicus' orders (*Ann.* 2.57; 2.69.1). His military actions demonstrate that he was a credible threat to Rome, regardless of his involvement in Germanicus' death. The fact that he was absolved of the charge of *venenum*, a charge not even mentioned in the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*, emphasizes the literary way in which Tacitus uses *venenum* in the *Annales*.⁸⁷ Here, as in many other passages, the *venenum* is indicative of larger threats to the state.⁸⁸ The people who are perverse enough to employ *venenum* demonstrate that they will not shy away from transgressing societal bounds in their quest for power. Piso may not have actually used any of these *malefica*, but that does not matter in Tacitus' narrative. *Venenum* serves as a tool for Tacitus to characterize individuals and

⁸⁵ See Ryberg (1942) for a general discussion of Tacitus' utilization of innuendo in his portrayal of Tiberius. See also Sullivan (1975), Develin (1983).

⁸⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 3.14: *Solum veneni crimen visus est diluisse, quod ne accusatores quidem satis firmabant, in convivio Germanici, cum super eum Piso discumberet, infectos manibus eius cibos arguentes. Quippe absurdum videbantur inter aliena servitia et tot adstantium visu, ipso Germanico coram, id ausum; offerebatque familiam reus et ministros in tormenta flagitabat.* "He seemed to refute only the crime of poison, which indeed the prosecutors did not make strong enough, arguing that in a feast of Germanicus, when Piso was reclining beside him, the food was poisoned with his hands. Indeed it seemed absurd that he would dare it among foreign servants and in the sight of so many bystanders, in the presence of Germanicus himself; and the defendant offered his household slaves for torture and was entreating his attendants." None of the other *malefica* are even mentioned in the charges of trial.

⁸⁷ Damon (1999) evaluates the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre* in conversation with Tacitus' account.

⁸⁸ Pollard (2014) comments on how the accusations of *venenum* against women in Tacitus' *Annales* is highly politicized, and even notes that the charge may have been used against those plotting sedition, upon whom no greater charge could, at the time, be levied.

engage with a larger discourse on unacceptable power and the means through which it is acquired.

Tacitus' critique of imperial power under the Julio-Claudians again targets Tiberius in particular. Tacitus establishes that Piso was a legitimate threat to Rome, and yet Tiberius still interceded on his behalf.⁸⁹ Tiberius' actions were not well received within his own time, and Tacitus states "the people were not more alert in other affairs and they exercised amongst themselves more secret sayings and mistrustful silence against the princeps." (*[is] haud alias intentior populus plus sibi in principem occultae vocis aut suspicacis silentii permisit* 3.11.2). Tiberius' support of Piso demonstrates an extreme flaw in his character, as Tacitus again comments on the nature of an individual based on with whom they associate. However, Tiberius' associations with unscrupulous characters bear even more weight due to his position within, and the very structure of, the Julio-Claudian principate. As previously mentioned, in the imperial system, those close to the *princeps* gain significant power and affluence.⁹⁰ Tiberius' decision not only to befriend but also to defend a seditious character like Piso illuminates the dangers of allowing one person to hold such power. Piso's prominence and friendship to Tiberius was what allowed him to have military control and become a threat to Rome in the first place. Yet again, Tiberius associates with treacherous and detestable characters, and puts the entirety of Rome at risk as a result.

The gender dynamics further reflect poorly on Tiberius, as the *princeps*. Even though he is the emperor, he is threatened by the familial infighting and the potential of Germanicus'

⁸⁹Tac. *Ann.* 3.12 Tiberius presents a lengthy appeal on behalf of Piso to the Senate.

⁹⁰ Wallace-Hadrill (1996) provides an overview of the imperial court and how these power dynamics manifested themselves during the early principate.

familial line, and his own role was secured through the similar secretive maneuverings of Livia.⁹¹ Moreover, Tiberius himself is often subject to the will of his mother Livia. Tacitus describes Livia appealing to Tiberius on behalf of Plancina: “he spoke on behalf of Plancina with shame and disgrace, pleading the entreaties of his mother” (*pro Plancina cum pudore et flagitio disseruit, matris preces obtendens* 3.17.1). Livia’s continued involvement in these affairs, and her success in securing a pardon for Plancina, demonstrates the control she held over Tiberius and the imperial system. Meanwhile, Tiberius comes across as subject to the power of his mother. Livia is portrayed as a powerful political player, and while this is due to her role as Augustus’ widow more so than Tiberius’ mother, she is still demonstrative of these larger flaws in the imperial system.

The complex account of the death of Germanicus therefore emphasizes the highly literary way Tacitus both talks about and employs *venenum* as a means through which to criticize Tiberius and the imperial administration. Just as with Sejanus, the inclusion of *venenum* in this episode stains the characters involved. Tiberius and Livia are sullied by association. However, all of these issues result from the structure of the principate under the Julio-Claudians. The concentrated power of the princeps was what allowed women like Livia and insubordinates like Piso to gain such prominence and cause such damage.

Conclusion

The presence of *venenum* brings additional nuance to these accounts and strengthens Tacitus’ critique of imperial power and the Julio-Claudians who befouled the system in its early development. In both accounts, the use of *venenum* contributes to the characterization of people

⁹¹ Boatwright (2021) argues that during the early imperial period, the institutional rights of women as a whole did not increase. Her claim demonstrates that the powers Livia and Agrippina the Elder demonstrated were unusual, and due solely to their position within the principate. Bauman (1994), “Tiberius, Livia, and Agrippina” analyzes the connection between these two women and the power they gained and manipulated throughout Tiberius’ reign.

closely associated with Tiberius. Tiberius' association with these unsavory characters in turn stains his own reputation. His failings of character ultimately highlight a fatal flaw within the privatized Julio-Claudian principate: those close to the princeps similarly gain exorbitant amounts of influence.

It is for this reason that *venenum* emerges as a tool through which to gain imperial power. Sejanus and Piso both killed a supposed heir with *venenum*, an action which should have increased their own standing and political power. A common theme throughout both of these accounts is the connection between *venenum* and the succession of imperial power (Calhoon 2010), an idea equally visible within the second chapter in the actions of Agrippina the Younger and Nero. In Sejanus' account, Tacitus not only portrays Sejanus as using *venenum*, but using it explicitly for the purposes of gaining imperial power. Drusus was not merely a random political rival; he was Tiberius' son and therefore the biggest obstacle between Sejanus and gaining a full share of imperial power. Tacitus similarly depicts Piso as a serious threat to Rome and links this political danger to the larger discourse of magic. When he recounts the intricate evidence of *malefica* and *venenum* in the death of Germanicus, Tacitus establishes the concept of *venenum* as a means through which to grasp at imperial power, an idea present throughout the remainder of the *Annales*. Neither Sejanus nor Piso gained *imperium maius*, but neither man met their ultimate doom specifically because of their use of *venenum*. While the use of *venenum* against political enemies was by no means a new concept, under the principate, its impact increased due to the concentration of power. The Julio-Claudian system provided the corrupt imperial family which allowed the practice of *venenum*, and those who would wish to use it, to run riot in Rome.

Conclusion

Tacitus' engagement with the literary discourse of magic ultimately contributes to his critique of the imperial system. In this thesis, I have sought to examine the intricacies in Tacitus' portrayal of *venenum* in his *Annales* and understand the connection between a select few prominent historical figures and the literary discourse of magic, often as manifested through the stereotype of the witch. The involvement of each of these figures — Piso & Plancina, Sejanus, Agrippina the Younger, and Nero — in magical practice creates and demonstrates new levels of depravity in their characterization. The negative characterization of each of these individuals, in turn, reflects poorly on the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Tacitus presents the Julio-Claudian administration as run by a series of corrupt or spineless rulers, and it is exactly this broken system which allows perverse people, such as the ones analyzed in this thesis, to rise to prominence.

As Tacitus portrays events, the use of *venenum* is symptomatic of the flaws in the imperial system, namely, the concentration and privatization of *imperium*. The changes to the political system allowed *venenum* to serve as an increasingly effective tool to secure the succession of imperial power. In a system where power is so greatly condensed in the hands of the imperial family, one murder can have disastrous consequences and greatly alter the power hierarchy. Tacitus depicts the Julio-Claudians and those close to the imperial family as taking advantage of this flaw, and as time and Tacitus' narrative progress, the role of *venenum* as a common tool for securing *imperium* solidifies. In the Tiberian Books, Piso and Sejanus, both outsiders to the imperial family, try and fail to use *venenum* to increase their power and standing within the empire. However, by the later Books, Tacitus shows Agrippina the Younger and Nero, both members of the imperial family, successfully employing *venenum* to control the succession

of imperial power. Tacitus spotlights the corruption of the Julio-Claudian dynasty through his portrayal of *venenum* as a readily used and often effective instrument of the imperial system.

Just as the transition to the empire led to the privatization of imperial power, the imperial household simultaneously became more public, which allowed for over-extension of gendered power. As Augustus made the entire empire his *domus*, so too, did his *domus* become the empire. The imperial women, therefore, gained extensive control and affluence within Rome, as is exemplified in Agrippina the Younger. *Venenum* provides a discourse for commenting on the new overreach of gendered power, due to the inherent relationship in Roman literature between women, magic, and power. The concept of *venenum* itself represents the transgression of social and political boundaries, often by women, which is what occurs in the *Annales*. In portraying these political figures as using *venenum*, Tacitus conjures up the images of magic and witches from Roman literature, and thus links these individuals and their affluence with the uncanny and unacceptable powers achieved through witchcraft. In this way, Tacitus besmirches the individuals and the very institution which granted them such importance.

At the very heart of this discussion are the fears over changing power dynamics, and, ultimately, the diminishing control of the Roman senatorial elites. The uncanny and frightening concept of magic, as it exists in the Roman literary discourse, reflects the fears that elite men felt about the transgression of social and political boundaries. The Julio-Claudians, beginning with Augustus, fostered and benefited from the changes, while the significance of the senators diminished. Tacitus connects the ruling family to the unnatural and terrifying practice of magic, which reflected senatorial thoughts and feelings on the Julio-Claudians as well as their use and misuse of *imperium*. Tacitus therefore, in associating the agents of imperial power with witches and cultivating the feeling of abjection within his readers, ultimately critiques a system in which

power was taken from the senate and mishandled by a family of monsters and weak-willed figureheads. Yet, the literary *topos* only metaphorically represents these social and senatorial concerns, whereas the Julio-Claudians were real people who actually wielded such extensive power and transgressed social and political boundaries. Witches stalk the pages of Tacitus' *Annales* but, perhaps more frightening, so do the Julio-Claudians.

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