

A Tacitean Tragedy: Theatric Structure, Character, and Space in the Downfall of Messalina

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Abstract: *The betrayal of Valeria Messalina, dramatically recounted by Tacitus in *Annales* 11.xxvi-xxxviii, represents one of the greatest scandals of Emperor Claudius' reign. Messalina's boldness in choosing a new husband, Gaius Silius, in Claudius' place without his knowledge demonstrated the Emperor's frailty in curbing the excesses of his own household. Tacitus' account of the entire episode bears noteworthy structural, conventional, and spatial resemblances to the customs of Greek tragedy—parallels which imbue the Messalina affair with a greater sense of didacticism and drama. It is through this tragic lens that Tacitus, with his usual cynicism and disdain, conveys how far the Principate has strayed from the idealized Augustan values of familial piety upon which it was founded.*

Tacitus is as much an avid chronicler of the worst traits latent in human nature as he is a biographer of the Roman imperial family.¹ His *Annales*, although grounded in verifiable events, consistently emphasize and exaggerate the unrelenting paranoia, cruelty, and subterfuge of the Julio-Claudians to illustrate human fallibility in the face of wealth, vice, and political power. Few episodes within the *Annales* are more indicative of this pessimistic Tacitean outlook than the bigamy and eventual execution of Emperor Claudius' third wife, Valeria Messalina.

Tacitus' account of Messalina's scandalous wedding to Gaius Silius in *Annales* 11.xxvi-xxxviii has been subject to considerable interpretive debate. Some classicists, including Christopher Nappa, maintain that Tacitus' account of Messalina's deviancy is a reflection of Claudius' questionable control over his own household.² Others, like Garrett Fagan, conversely argue that Tacitus' discussion of the episode serves more to portray the depths of Messalina's sexual deviancy than to criticize Claudius' own incompetence. According to Fagan, Tacitus presents Messalina as “an amoral nymphomaniac who had multiple paramours and could even leave her sleeping husband's side to take up station in a brothel.”³ She belongs to the same archetype of power-hungry, promiscuous and calculating imperial women as Livia Augusta and Agrippina the Younger, described in the *Annales* alongside her,⁴ although Fagan notes that all imperial women cannot be judged by Tacitus' assessment of a select few.⁵

While the intentions governing Tacitus' portrayal of Messalina remain nebulous as these conflict interpretations suggest, I maintain that the structure and language of Tacitus' narrative is strongly evocative of the spirit of Greek tragedy. This is hardly surprising given that different Classical literary styles—most notably rhetoric—are often syncretically fused in Hellenistic historiography.⁶ As Tacitus himself writes, his record is *fabulosum* (11.xxvii.1), or so shocking that it is worthy of a *fabula*, or dramatic tale. Through a combination of close readings, deference to secondary literature, and surveys of raw, textual data, I argue that Tacitus' narrative of

¹ Rutland, 15.

² Nappa, 194.

³ Fagan, 571.

⁴ Rutland, 17.

⁵ Fagan, 576.

⁶ Woodman, 70-101.

Messalina's downfall appears to mirror the style and force of Greek tragedy not only with respect to its structure, but also through its use of tragic conventions of character and space. An examination of the text through the lens of Greek tragedy frames Tacitus' discussion as a cynical but moralistic narrative which expresses a central message more didactic than either a condemnation of Claudius' own ignorance or Messalina's sexual deviancy, i.e., the legitimacy of imperial authority under the Principate is hopelessly fragmented if even women, deemed by Romans as an inferior sex,⁷ can threaten the emperor's right to rule.⁸

Tacitus' narrative organization of Messalina's treachery arguably resembles the typical structure of a Greek tragedy. The standard format of a Greek tragedy, excluding the intermittent choral parts which would be untranslatable into prose, can be roughly divided into three primary components: (1) The *prologue*, which serves to introduce the tragedy's subject and its characters; (2) a series of *episodes*, or periods of action which advance the plot; and (3) the *exode*, the final scene of the play propounding its overall message, usually through use of the chorus.⁹ There are clear, natural divisions within Tacitus' narrative which neatly correspond to the Greek dramatic divisions outlined above. These divisions are not arbitrary; they are marked by changes within the text discussed in chronological order.

Chapters 11.xxvi–11.xxix collectively mirror the prologue of a Greek tragedy; they provide the biographical information of the conspiracy's three main actors—Messalina, Silius, and Narcissus—needed for the reader to understand the events that follow.¹⁰ An overview of Messalina herself dominates the opening sentence of 11.xxvi, in which Tacitus describes her as “flowing forth to unthinkable sexual passions (*libidines*) since her skill of adultery was perverted (*verta*) into disgust” (11.xxvi.1). Tacitus' carefully crafted opening remark immediately tells the reader everything he needs to know about Messalina to rationalize her actions throughout the rest of his account. The use of the ablative absolute (*facilitate...versa*) syntactically and visually isolates Messalina's debaucheries from the rest of the sentence, emphasizing their salience. Silius receives the same treatment—a short, prominent biographical description to contextualize his behavior. Silius, weary of the secret affair and eager to receive Messalina publically, “was urging that the deception (*dissimulationem*) . . . be shattered . . . [for] he was unmarried, childless, and prepared for a wedding and for adopting Britannicus” (11.xxvi.1-4). The tricolon of Silius' motives emphasizes his desire to make the wedding public while highlighting the political factors which drive him. With Messalina and Silius' background emphatically defined by their prominent position at the start of the chapter and by their bold syntax, the remainder of the passage then expands upon their wedding plans to further establish the context for the rest of the drama.¹¹

⁷ L'Hoir, 5.

⁸ This analysis restricts itself to a discussion of Tacitus' narrative structure, use of characters, and employment of space. Another link to the tragic tradition—the rhetorical and theatrical use of vocabulary and syntax—exists (see Stackelberg), but it has already been frequently debated in secondary literature and it is hence not discussed here for reasons of scope and novelty.

⁹ MacLennon.

¹⁰ Claudius himself remains absent from Tacitus' *dramatis personae*, perhaps suggesting his deplorable passivity.

¹¹ For reasons of scope, an analysis of 11.xxvii and 11.xxviii is discussed here only. Both provide a brief break from character description while still remaining within the prerequisites of a dramatic prologue. In 11.xxvii, Tacitus' own voice acts very much like the omniscient chorus present in the prologue which comment on the drama from the sidelines, saying that “I am in no way unaware that [this account] would seem to have been something so worthy of a tale for anyone of mortals,” (11.xxvii.1). In 11.xxviii, Tacitus relates the gossip circulating the state, a reaction to Messalina's scandal which further describes the status quo of Rome as a form of background to the coming events.

A similar focus on character description returns in 11.xxix when Tacitus introduces the freedmen who disapprove of Messalina's deviancy and feel threatened by the imminent power transfer from Claudius to Silius. The narrative surrounds Narcissus, whom Tacitus presents as bold and calculating, unlike his fellow freedmen. His equal, Pallas, would not act against Messalina "out of cowardice (*per ignaviam*)" (11.xxix.2) while his other companion, Callistus, "experienced in the earlier court," similarly stayed his hand because he knew "that power is held by cautious rather than keen counselors" (11.xxix.2). The juxtaposition of Narcissus with his more timid counterparts accentuates both his centrality to the narrative and his temerity. Tacitus also suggests that subterfuge is not new to Narcissus, for Narcissus had already "fashioned the murder of Appian" (11.xxix.1). With these details, Tacitus offers a precise overview of Narcissus's personality, just as he did for Messalina and Silius. Such descriptions are fitting for a prologue; they sufficiently brief the reader with the character context for the episodes which follow.

Paragraphs 11.xxx–11.xxxvi take the form of episodes, individual components of the tragedy advancing the plot towards its conclusion. There is little biographical discussion of setting, context, character, or motivation within these passages; each is starkly narrative, indicating their episodic function. For example, when Claudius discovers Messalina's marriage from the testimony of his mistress Calpurnia in 11.xxx, Calpurnia's character is hardly discussed. Tacitus offers no information but her name, which itself is described only in an abrupt, three-word parenthetical isolated from the rest of the sentence, "*id* [i.e. Calpurnia] *paelici nomen*" (11.xxx.1). Other characters less integral to the plot, such as Turraneus, Lusius Geta, Largus Caecina (advisers whom Claudius questions in 11.xxxi and 11.xxxiii) and Vibidia, the senior vestal Virgin whom Messalina begs to intercede on her behalf (11.xxxi), are given similar treatment. The onus of each chapter is placed only on advancing the narrative.

Moreover, each chapter introduces discrete plot developments to the narrative in a punctuated fashion of cause-and-effect, like successive scenes within a play. Claudius discovers Messalina's affair in one chapter (11.xxx) and consequently summons his closest friends to verify its existence after being thoroughly terrified (*satis constat eo pavore offusum Claudium*) in the next (11.xxxi). Meanwhile, Messalina and Silius quickly disband their wedding party as each prepares to face an irate Claudius (11.xxxii), but Narcissus ruins their hopes of a peaceful resolution when he forbids Messalina and her children an audience with Claudius (11.xxxiv). Subsequently, Narcissus ensures that Silius and other Roman *equites* are put to death (11.xxxv) before the impassioned speech of Mnester can dissuade Claudius from punishing all the conspirators too harshly (11.xxxvi). These passages depicting action and reaction appear as a stream of constantly shifting characters, dialogues, and locations with no abatement—not even Tacitus' own critical voice, expressed in the first person as in 11.xxvii, interrupts the cinematic drama. They are thus episodic in nature.

Ultimately, 11.xxxvii–11.xxxviii resemble an *exode*, the final scene of the drama imparting its central theme. The similarity in part stems from Messalina's last dialogue with her mother, which brings about an astonishing epiphany suitable for the conclusion of a tragic narrative. As Tacitus describes, "[Messalina was] prostrate on the ground, with her mother sitting by her side . . . persuading her that she ought not to await her assassin, and that her life had passed and nothing other than the honor of death must be sought" (11.xxxvii.5). Once she hears the truth from her own mother, Messalina realizes that her life has come to an end. Tacitus reports that though "there was nothing honest left to her spirit corrupted by lust" (11.xxxvii.6), she "looked inwardly at (*introspexit*) her fortune then for the first time" (11.xxxviii.1), with the

temporal adverbs *tunc primum* accentuating the moment of change. Messalina knows she must die, a realization which brings the drama to a conclusion.

Moreover, the resemblance of 11.xxxvii-11.xxxviii to an *exode* is thematic as well as narrative. Tacitus cleverly conveys the tragedy's central message—the frailty of imperial power and the perversion of the imperial household—through the irony of his closing comments, just as an *exode* does for a tragedy. Following the conspiracy, nothing results as it should: Claudius' reaction to Messalina's death is mysteriously emotionless given his previous state of terror (*satis constat eo pavore offusum Claudium*, 11.xxxi.3), for “In the following days, he gave not even signs of hatred, jubilation, anger, or sadness, or finally of any human emotion (*adfectus*)” (11.xxxviii.3). Tacitus conveys the absurdity of this unexpected apathy through the forceful asyndeton of human emotions (*odii gaudii, irae tristitiae . . . signa*) which Claudius should, but somehow cannot, experience. Meanwhile, the scheming Narcissus, who denied Messalina a chance to plead for her defense while selfishly robbing her two innocent children of a mother to preserve his own status, was nonetheless rewarded with the *quaestoria insignia* (11.xxxviii.5). The perversion and irony transcends the text itself and speaks to the larger injustices inherent in Julio-Claudian rule, just as the closing within an *exode* would address the finer didactic themes of a tragedy.

Although the greatest parallels between Tacitus' account of Messalina's folly and Greek tragedy seem to exist on a structural plane, there are other more subtle tragic or theatrical tendencies latent in Tacitus' use of character and space.

As classicist L. H. G. Greenwood notes of Greek character convention, “Often there are two speaking actors only on the stage at once; never more than four at once, and very seldom more than three.”¹² A close review of characters who appear in each chapter between 11.xxvi-11.xxxviii reveals that Tacitus, for the most part, abides by this rule.

Character Present/Chapter	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	
Messalina	X					X	X		X			X	X	
Silius	X					X	X			X				
Narcissus			Gossip of unidentified Romans	X	X			X	X	X	X		X	
Claudius						X	X		X	X	X			
Pallas		Tacitus in the first person			X									
Callistus					X									
Vitellius										X	X	X		
Caecina										X	X			
Mnester													X	
Vbidia									X		X			
Vettius								X						
Calpurnia							X							
Cleopatra						X								
Turranius							X							
Geta						X								
Britannicus							X							
Octavia							X							
Lepida												X	X	
Evodus												X	X	

¹² Greenwood, 32.

If we consider each chapter as a new scene, only Chapters xxxi, xxxii, and xxxiv break the four-character-per-scene limit. Yet these anomalies are easily explainable. Within these chapters, Tacitus flits between multiple simultaneous events involving completely different characters. In xxxi, for example, Claudius holds court with Turranius and Geta at one location as Messalina, Silius, and Vetius are in an entirely different venue celebrating the wedding. The same explanation accounts for Chapters xxxii and xxxiv; never at any time would more than four of these characters congregate in the same space.

Tacitus' use of space is theatric like his distribution of characters. Although it does not appear to be uniquely tragic, Tacitus' focus on the Gardens of Lucullus, where the crux of Messalina's downfall takes place, evokes the same cinematic and theatrical spirit imposed by tragedy. In the same way that the stage set of a play is constructed to echo the core themes of a show, the Gardens of Lucullus are strategically employed to emphasize the themes of vice, excess, and luxury framing Messalina's betrayal. As Katharine T. von Stackelberg notes, the Horti Luculliani are:

“... usually attributed to the well-documented rhetorical trope whereby luxury estates were correlated with feminized pleasure and self-gratification. There is a satisfying moral symmetry to the tale; Messalina, indulging her every desire, overreaches herself to become the victim of her own excess, dying in the gardens she herself has killed for.”¹³

In short, the Gardens are a symbol of the gluttonous Julio-Claudian dominance which Tacitus criticizes throughout the *Annales*. This would have been immediately apparent to any Roman reading Tacitus' account. As Stackelberg notes, the Gardens of Lucullus were the nicest gardens in Rome not owned by a member of the imperial family, and consequently, they would have been associated with opulence—especially since Messalina and Lepida, imperial women representing the height of power and wealth, considered the space as an ideal refuge to escape from Claudius.¹⁴ Tacitus has no need to speak of what the gardens looked like, and he never does; referencing them by name is sufficient to immediately evoke a sense of elitist leisure. The Gardens are thereby theatrically used like a well-crafted set as they exist to silently mirror the salient themes of the narrative.

The Gardens are also theatrically employed because Tacitus defines them as a location of cinematic, narrative climax, or as Stackelberg herself writes, a “performative and transgressive space.”¹⁵ According to Stackelberg, a space is performative if it “facilitates specific ritual actions and utterances in order to meditate moments of societal crisis, usually rites of passage.”¹⁶ The Gardens fulfill precisely this function within Tacitus' account. It is within the Gardens that Messalina contemplates the consequences of her actions and realizes that she has severely deviated from punctilio before she is executed. Her rite of passage, or moment of transformation, is her recognition that she has transgressed the norms of monogamy expected of Roman women. Tacitus attributes little substantive detail to the precise locations of other dramatic events within 11.xxvi–11.xxxviii which also facilitate moments of character transformation. There is no specific reference to where Claudius is when Calpurnia shockingly reveals Messalina's betrayal, or even where Silius and the other *equites* who kept silent about Messalina's wedding were when

¹³ von Stackelberg, 596.

¹⁴ Ibid., 599.

¹⁵ Ibid., 595.

¹⁶ Ibid., 611.

they were executed. Although Silius' house and the Praetorian Camp are referenced in 11.xxxv (*patefieri domum adulteri atque illuc deduci imperatorem iubet*, 11.xxxv.2, and *incensumque et ad minas erumpentem castris infert*, 11.xxxv.4), Tacitus reveals no additional concrete locations for any of these traumatizing events. He thus not only employs the Horti Luculliani theatrically as a space of change, but also emphasizes them above other spaces as a particularly transgressive one.

In short, Tacitus' portrayal of Messalina's downfall in 11.xxvi-11.xxxviii appears to imitate some salient characteristics of Greek tragedy, not only in terms of its structure, but also with respect to its theatrical use of character and space. Specifically, it presents itself in the tripartite form of *prologue*, *episodes*, and *exode*, while simultaneously adhering to theatrical rules of character and space, using the set of the Horti Luculliani as a transformative locus to illustrate the broader themes of his tale. Although it is not impossible that Tacitus' conformity to these dramatic conventions is purely coincidental, a chance imitation of such definitive structural, conventional, and spatial pillars of the genre is unlikely. More tellingly, there already exists a strong precedent for how the syncretic blend of different literary genres—particularly rhetoric and tragedy—can enrich historiography with the depth and emotional subtext of its components. Syncretism is not a rare convention, but one employed multiple times throughout the *Annales* and within the broader scope of Roman literature. Though a thorough examination of these parallels is beyond the scope of this analysis, consider the libel trial of Cremutius Cordus in *Annales* 4.xxxi-xxxv, in which Tacitus inserts an impassioned plea, written in the form of an elaborate Ciceronian speech, into the mouth of the defendant. Here, the integration of well-argued, logically structured, and precedent-oriented rhetoric into the author's historiographic record adds pathos and depth to Cordus' plea for freedom of expression while highlighting the pettiness of his accusers.

Also worth noting briefly is the subtle integration of Greek tragic themes in the record of other contextually separate Roman historians, most notably Livy. Generally speaking, Livy's discussion of familial dynastic strife within regal households (*avitiū malum*, 1.vi) frames a large part of his surviving narrative and remains a dominant theme within *Ab Urbe Condita* just as in many works of Greek tragedy like *Medea* and the *Oresteia*. In Book I alone, the conflict between Numitor and Aemulius, the mortal feud between Remus and Romulus, and Tullia's murder of her father evoke parallels to themes of cyclical, ancestral guilt and household violence omnipresent in Greek tragedy—themes which in both genres are often conveyed by the actions of strong-willed, female characters.¹⁷

The tragic lens of Tacitus' account is therefore important because it offers more legitimacy to an interpretation of Messalina's affair as a didactic condemnation of Julio-Claudian politics. As L. H. G. Greenwood notes, "Greek Tragedy offered symbolism rather than illusion."¹⁸ By extension, it sought to propound broader, didactic ideas which transcended the physical action on stage. Like most of the events in the *Annales*, the wedding of Silius and Messalina speaks more profoundly to Tacitus' cynicism regarding the easily-disrupted authority of the Julio-Claudians; it is not a mere account of debauchery. As Tacitus describes, Messalina not only seems to circumvent the authority of the emperor through base profligacy, but she also

¹⁷ Recent scholarship on themes of household conflict in the *Oresteia* by Renaud Gagné in Chapter 7 (pp. 394-445) of *Ancestral Fault in Ancient Greece*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013 describes these themes in depth, though Gagné does not discuss their Roman reception.

¹⁸ Greenwood, 33.

appears to throw the entire imperial household into disarray simply by integrating a new, politically powerful lover into the privileged space reserved exclusively for the *princeps*.¹⁹

This breach is particularly shocking because it undermines the Augustan value of *pietas*, or loyalty to gods, country, and *family*, which supposedly shaped the idealized cultural norms of Augustus' Golden Age and the code of behavior for his Julio-Claudian successors to emulate.²⁰ Messalina disrespects the sacred bonds of marriage beneath the nose of the very figure who is supposed to serve as a manifest embodiment of a pious union. The inherent didacticism of a tragic lens makes these transgressions all the more salient, leaving the reader to wonder, as Tacitus did, whether or not the legitimacy of the Principate was only superficial.

¹⁹ Fagan, 576.

²⁰ For more on *pietas* and its artistic and literary expression in Augustan society, see Chapter 3 (pp. 80-140) of Karl Galinsky's *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction*, Princeton: Princeton University, 1996.

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