MESSALINA'S FOLLY[1]

I

The fall from grace and subsequent execution of Valeria Messalina, third wife of the emperor Claudius, constitutes one of the most dramatic episodes in the Julio-Claudian era.[2] The tale was considered so extraordinary by Tacitus that he felt obliged to preface his narrative with an assurance to the reader that, fantastical as it all seems, his account is verified by the verbal and written testimony of his elders.[3] The pressing question for any modern enquiry is, simply, what are we to make of the events surrounding Messalina's fall? Before proceeding to address this question, a brief recap of the events will be useful. Tacitus' account is the fullest.

Sometime in the second half of A.D. 47 Messalina began to feel a crazed passion (*furori proximus amor*) for C. Silius, the handsomest man in Rome and a consul-designate. Messalina forced him to divorce his wife, Junia Silana, and embarked on a passionate affair with him. Tacitus draws attention to Silius' difficult position: if he refused the emperor's wife, he was done for, but if he complied, despite the risks, there might be some future advantage to him. The affair was conducted openly. Yet despite the adulterers' lack of discretion Claudius remained ignorant of the whole business (Tac. *Ann*. 11.12). At this point, Tacitus leaves the affair aside and turns his attention to other matters.

When the historian returns to Messalina's misdemeanours it is the following year (A.D. 48), and the adultery appears to have gone somewhat stale. Messalina is starting to yearn for 'untried excesses' (*incognitae libidines*), so Silius proposes the ultimate escapade: she should divorce Claudius and marry him. When Claudius is absent at Ostia, she marries Silius in front of friends, and a celebration follows (Tac. *Ann*. 11.26, 11.31.4–6). Now the real powerholders mobilize—Claudius' coterie of ex-slaves, particulary his secretary *ab epistulis*, Narcissus. As Messalina and her new husband celebrate with a wild party, Narcissus skilfully stage-manages her denunciation and eventual execution, all the while revealing just enough information to Claudius to alarm him, but not enough to allow the emperor second thoughts about punishing his own wife. Male associates fall with the empress, and an unpleasant scene ensues in the Praetorian camp as several men of varying station are brought forward and consigned to execution.[4] Claudius remains passive throughout and is led to act entirely on the

[1] Many people provided valuable input for this paper as it evolved, especially C. Eilers, P. B. Harvey, Jr, P. Murgatroyd, R. J. Rowland, Jr, and R. Weigel. None, of course, is to be held responsible for any errors that remain or opinions expressed.

[2] The events are covered in full by Tacitus (*Ann*. 11.12, 26–38). Messalina's death is also mentioned in Suet. *Claud*. 26.2, 29.3, 36, 39.1; Dio 60 (61).31.1–5; Sen. *Octavia* 257–69, *Apocol*. 11, 13; Joseph. *AJ* 20.149; Juv. *Sat*. 10.329–45; Aur. Vict. *Caes*. 4.12–13. See also the modern treatments in B. Levick, *Claudius* (New Haven, 1990); A. Momigliano, *Claudius: The Emperor and his Achievement* (Cambridge, 1961, rev. edn); V. Scramuzza, *The Emperor Claudius* (Oxford, 1940); H. Willenbücher, *Der Kaiser Claudius: Eine historische Studie* (Mainz, 1914).

[3] See Tac. *Ann*. 11.27.1–2, esp. the comment (at 11.27.2) *sed nihil compositum miraculi causa, verum audita scriptaque senioribus tradam*.

[4] They are named (Tac. *Ann*. 11.35.5–36.5) as: the senators C. Silius (on whom see below, n. 39) and the ex-praetor Iuncus Vergilianus (*PIR*^{2} I 712); the *equites* Titius Proculus (*RE* 6A.1569 [1937], s.v. 'Titius 35' [Stein]), Vettius Valens (*RE* 8A.2.1869 [1958], s.v. 'Vettius 51' [Hanslik]), Pompeius Urbicus (*PIR*^{2} P 665), Saufeius Trogus (*RE* 2A.257 [1923], s.v. 'Saufeius 8' [Stein]),

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advice of his freedmen. Even Messalina's death is ordered by Narcissus without the emperor's knowledge. Claudius, having adjourned to dinner, starts to show signs of tenderness in his attitude toward his wayward spouse, yet he sits ignorant while Narcissus engineers her end by purporting to represent the emperor's wishes to the guardsmen. Messalina faces death in a cowardly and, to Roman sentiments, despicable fashion. Accompanied only by her mother, she quails at suicide and is run through by a guardsman. When informed of her execution, the emperor continues his dinner in silence and for several days thereafter shows no sign of human emotion (Tac. *Ann*. 11.37–8).

It is worth noting the heavily stylized nature of Tacitus' account.[5] All the historian's literary talents are on display in these passages, as the freedmen, led by Narcissus, scramble to orchestrate events to their benefit and Messalina's ruin. (For the noble Roman reader the dominance of the ex-slaves would have been a source of considerable disgust.) Claudius' very pliancy is a major factor in the drama: he could change his mind at any moment, so speed is of the essence (Tac. *Ann*. 11.28.2, 11.34.1, 11.37.2–3). The suspense builds after the affair is revealed to Claudius. The focus of the account shifts rapidly between the emperor's panic, Messalina's attempts to gain access to him, and Narcissus' efforts to prevent her from doing just that. Particularly powerful is the crucial scene on the road to Ostia where Messalina travels out from the city in a rubbish cart—accompanied by her children, Octavia and Britannicus, and the chief Vestal Virgin, Vibidia—to meet Claudius' carriage on its way back to the city.[6] In a frenzied scene, Messalina first cries out to Claudius to hear the mother of his children. Narcissus intervenes, shouts her down, and blocks Claudius' view of her with documents attesting her numerous indiscretions. Narcissus also successfully counters a second attempt to have Britannicus and Octavia presented to the emperor. But when Vibidia intercedes, petitioning for Messalina's right to be heard, Narcissus parries by promising what he knows will not happen: Messalina will get her chance to have a hearing in due course. He then superciliously urges Vibidia to be gone and to attend to her sacred duties (Tac. *Ann*. 11.34.3–5). It is a tremendous evocation of a tense encounter, during which the outcome of the whole tragedy hangs in the balance. The characters are sharply drawn and play off one another dramatically: the wavering Claudius, the increasingly panicked Messalina, the scheming Narcissus, the austere

Decrius Calpurnianus (*PIR*^{2} D 34), Sulpicius Rufus (*RE* 4A.843 [1931], s.v. 'Sulpicius 91' [Stein]), and Traulus Montanus (*RE* 6A.2232 [1937], s.v. 'Sex. Traulus Montanus' [Stein]). Of these, Proculus is identified as a bodyguard of Messalina's, Calpurnianus was the prefect of the *vigiles*, Rufus was a procurator of a gladiatorial training school, and Traulus was a one-night stand for Messalina. Valens appears to have been a famous doctor (see Pliny, *NH* 29.8, 29.21). Finally came Mnester (*PIR*^{2} M 646), the dissolute actor (see also Dio 60.22.4–5). Seneca (*Apocol*. 13) inserts into the list of condemned *equites*, M. Helvius (*PIR*^{2} H 63; possibly a senator), a Cotta (*PIR*^{2} C 1545), and a Fabius (*PIR*^{2} F 13), all otherwise unknown, while omitting Proculus, Calpurnianus, Urbicus, and Rufus. Also accused but spared, according to Tacitus, were Suillius Caesoninus (*RE* 4A.718 [1931], s.v. 'Suillius 2' [Fluss]), son of P. Suillius, Messalina's assistant in the ruin of Valerius Asiaticus (Tac. *Ann*. 11.1–3); and Plautius Lateranus (*PIR*^{2} P 468), nephew of one of Claudius' commanders in Britain (Tac. *Agr*. 14.1, *Ann*. 13.32.3).

[5] See the detailed commentaries of H. Furneaux, *The Annals of Tacitus* (Oxford, 1907^2), 2.[40–45] and 39–53; E. Koestermann, *Cornelius Tacitus: Annalen* (Heidelberg, 1967), 3.85–106; A. Mehl, *Tacitus über Kaiser Claudius: Die Erignisse am Hof* (Munich, 1974), 50–95. Note also E. O'Gorman, *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus* (Cambridge, 2000), 115–21.

[6] The presence of Vibidia at first seems strange, but her support had been secured earlier by Messalina (Tac. *Ann*. 11.32.5) and Vestals could be called on to act as intercessors in familial or political disputes; see Suet. *Jul*. 1.2, Tac. *Hist*. 3.81.

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Vibidia. In the end, Narcissus directs the action, even if by underhand means and open mendacity. For the purposes of the modern investigator, however, Tacitus' masterful depiction gives pause. Dramatic and evocative it may be, but how accurate is it?

Anecdotes in imperial history have been shown to be questionable in their specifics, but illuminating in what they reveal about Roman beliefs and ideologies. Although not an anecdote in any meaningful sense, the entire Silius episode has about it the feel of a moral story and could arguably be read as no more historically reliable than similar, if shorter, vignettes from our sources.[7] Extending this line of thinking further and taking what one might call a strictly 'literary' view of Tacitus' account, it is arguable that these events are an entirely literary construct, unreflective of any demonstrable historical reality. The identification of parallels or echoes elsewhere in classical literature (especially the Gyges/Candaules story in Herodotus 1.7–12) suggest that stories of ruinous royal adultery stand in an enduring tradition. Ancient attitudes toward women, especially those in power, also obtrude.[8] But literary and dramatic artistry was expected of ancient historians,[9] so that the display of such artistry (including evocation of familiar motifs and even vocabulary) does not preclude historical accuracy; and Tacitus' use of anecdotes or his attitude toward women would hardly cause him to invent an entire episode so pivotal to Claudius' reign. A more moderate view, therefore, is to place trust in Tacitus' scrupulous handling of his material and argue that, however he may have chosen to dramatize these events with his literary skill, his account of Messalina's fall is unlikely to have been a wholesale fiction.[10] If we accept the latter position, the problem arises of how to prevent the arbitrary selection of elements in Tacitus' account for acceptance or rejection. Comparison with other sources offers a starting point.

The major thrust of Tacitus' account is fully confirmed in other sources. The fact of Messalina's fall is attested by inscriptions, outside the literary tradition. Other writers all report her passion for Silius, the marriage, and the machinations of the freedmen.[11] Only incidental (or questionable) details are added. Suetonius (*Claud.* 26.2) records Claudius' pledge to the Praetorians that, should he marry again, they could kill him. Suetonius also reports, but disbelieves, that the freedmen induced Claudius himself to sign the marriage contract between Silius and Messalina by claiming that the marriage was a fiction to deflect from the emperor some portended danger to 'Messalina's

[7] R. Saller, 'Anecdotes as historical evidence for the Principate', *G&R* 27 (1980), 69–83. Note that Saller (69) distinguishes anecdotes from 'longer historical narratives'.

[8] See e.g. S. R. Joshel, 'Female desire and the discourse of empire: Tacitus's Messalina', in J. P Hallett and M. B. Skinner (edd.), *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton, 1997), 221–54; T. Späth, *Männlichkeit und Weiblichkeit bei Tacitus: Zur Konstruktion der Geschlechter in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Frankfurt, 1994), especially 264–304. A similar schism between literary depiction and the real world, although applied to poetic representations of women, is found in e.g. B. Gold, '"But Ariadne was never there in the first place": finding the female in Roman poetry', in N. S. Rabinowitz and A. Richlin (edd.), *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (London, 1993), 75–101 (see also J. P. Hallett in the same volume, 44–72, esp. at 63); and M. Wyke, 'Written women: Propertius' *Scripta Puella*', *JRS* 77 (1987), 47–61. A different approach is A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (London, 1988), esp. 160–96 (on Tacitus) and 197–215 (on rhetorical form over factual content).

[9] See e.g. J. Ginsburg, *Tradition and Theme in the Annals of Tacitus* (Salem, 1981); R. Mellor, *Tacitus* (New York, 1993), 113–36.

[10] Tacitus' reliability is incontrovertibly established by R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), 378–407. See also below, pp. 569–71, on the implications of the *SCPP* for Tacitus' factual accuracy.

[11] See below, n. 30, for epigraphic testimony of her *damnatio memoriae*. For the other literary sources, see above, n. 2.

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husband'.[12] Dio (60 [61].31.1–5), who survives only in epitome at this point, adds further details. Writing from the perspective of posterity, when a tradition about Messalina had had opportunity to take root and grow, some of these details are tendentious in the extreme. Thus he exaggerates Messalina's one act of bigamy into a general desire on the empress's part to marry *all* of her lovers. As with any report of unfulfilled desire in our sources, this notice should be greeted with extreme scepticism. Dio also states that Messalina perished when she orchestrated the fall of Polybius, one of the imperial secretaries, and thus lost the trust of the freedmen. This claim reflects the broader tradition of the 'real' power behind Claudius' throne—wives and advisors—that is a standard feature of the ancient depictions of his reign.[13] Juvenal (*Sat*. 10.329–45) emphasizes Silius' impossible position, caught between the empress's fancy and the emperor's wrath. The tragedy *Octavia*, mistakenly attributed to Seneca, depicts Messalina's daughter musing on her mother's demise (at lines 257–69) and presents as well-known facts the outline of events reported in detail by Tacitus. Since it is widely held that this work was composed shortly after the death of Nero in A.D. 68, it seems that a tradition was already established within two decades of Messalina's fall.[14]

On the surface, then, Tacitus' account seems confirmed in all its essentials by other available evidence. But the corroboration itself is perhaps less reassuring than it initially appears. When members of the imperial house, or people closely linked to it, fell from grace, it was habitual to blame their demise on their own moral failings.[15] An 'official' version of events would be quickly circulated, as has been dramatically demonstrated by the discovery of the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre* (*SCPP*). This remarkable document records the official version of the trial and punishment of Cn. Calpurnius Piso for various offences in the East, not least his alleged role in Germanicus' premature death in A.D. 19. The document spells out plainly Piso's character flaws that led directly to his taking actions which condemned his memory to oblivion (Piso himself had committed suicide before the decree was issued) while simultaneously extolling the exemplary virtues of the emperor, the imperial house, and the Roman people.[16] Since these events are also covered by Tacitus, a comparison of Tacitus' account with that of the *SCPP* offers an instructive control for that historian's depiction of Messalina's fall. Scrutiny has revealed that the facts as presented in Tacitus and the *SCPP* are largely in agreement, but the moral 'spin' put on the events

[12] Suet. *Claud*. 29.3. A. A. Barrett (*Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire* [New Haven, 1996], 91) considers the detail plausible.

[13] On the plausibility of Dio's claim about Polybius, see below, n. 51.

[14] On the issues of authorship and date, see C. J. Herington, '*Octavia Praetexta*: a survey', *CQ* 11 (1961), 18–30; N. T. Pratt, *Seneca's Drama* (Chapel Hill, 1983), 28–29. O. Zwierlein, in the introduction to the OCT of Seneca's tragedies, dates it 'paulo post Neronis mortem' (vi). More recently, the play has been dated precisely to A.D. 68; see P. Kragelund, *Prophecy, Populism and Propaganda in the 'Octavia'* (Copenhagen, 1982), 53–4. Levick ([n. 2], 188) prefers a date in the late 70s.

[15] C. Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, 1993), especially 34–62. A striking example is provided by Octavia, the blameless wife of Nero, who was banished in A.D. 62 on implausible charges of adultery (Tac. *Ann*. 14.62.2–6). It is noteworthy, however, that Tacitus presents this charge as entirely baseless.

[16] Piso's character comes under severe assault in *SCPP*, lines 23–70. For full text and commentary, see W. Eck, A. Caballos, and F. Fernández, *Das Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre* (Munich, 1996). See also the text and English translation of C. Damon and S. Takács in the special edition of *AJP* 120 (1999), 1–41. For the moralistic messages embedded in the document, see A. Cooley, 'The moralizing message of the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*', *G&R* 45 (1998), 199–212; M. Griffin, 'The senate's story', *JRS* 87 (1997), 249–63.

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differs.[17] While encouraging, the coincidence is open to conflicting interpretations. A straightforward conclusion is that the core of Tacitus' account has been vindicated, since its essentials are corroborated by a contemporaneous document. Alternatively, a more uncritical Tacitus may have used the official story, as recorded in the *SCPP*, as the backbone for his version of Germanicus' death and its aftermath; if so, the agreement of both versions with each other may say nothing about the accuracy of either. Furthermore, with Piso's formal trial Tacitus would have had access to other state documents (the *acta senatus*, for instance) to check his information. Messalina's fall, in contrast, had been encompassed in private denunciations in the palace and an impromptu meting out of punishment at the Praetorian camp—neither of which is likely to have left much documentary evidence for a later historian to examine.[18] From this perspective, the unanimity of the ancient sources about the circumstances surrounding Messalina's fall might very well stem from their shared reliance on a single version of events put out shortly after her death, a version that would have blamed the empress's demise on her moral failings. If so, Tacitus' account may be seriously misleading.

A conclusion along such lines is unwarranted. Speculating about Tacitus' possible sources for Messalina's fall is not a particularly fruitful procedure for any interpretation of the events, although the memoirs of Agrippina the Younger, which he consulted, surely recounted the episode—from her particular perspective.[19] Other sources remain obscure. Rather, confidence in Tacitus' overall account stems more from a recognition that he was, in Syme's formulation, a 'sceptical historian' who did not take his sources at face value and would hardly reproduce without checking any version of such momentous events put out by the Julio-Claudian palace he so distrusted.[20] This surely is why he expressly states that he has done his homework on the Messalina episode and sifted through both oral and written accounts before composing his own version (Tac. *Ann*. 11.27.1–2). This unambiguous statement of

[17] See T. D. Barnes, 'Tacitus and the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*', *Phoenix* 52 (1998), 125–48; C. Damon, 'The trial of Cn. Piso in Tacitus and the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*', *AJP* 120 (1999), 143–62; Griffin (n. 16), 258–61; R. J. A. Talbert, 'Tacitus and the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*', *AJP* 120 (1999), 87–97. The most glaring factual discrepancy between the two accounts is in matters of chronology. Syme ([n. 10], 390–6), however, long ago noted general problems in Tacitus' presentation of chronology and geography, but judged the historian otherwise highly reliable. See also the similar assessment of Griffin (n. 16), 259–61. Another consideration of the topic concludes that Tacitus did not consult the edict in his researches, W. D. Lebek, 'Das Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone patre und Tacitus', *ZPE* 128 (1999), 182–211.

[18] Tacitus (*Ann*. 11.35.3–36.5) offers no legal term for these proceedings, no doubt on purpose. They should perhaps be considered a *cognitio (extraordinaria?)*, see F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London, 1977), 228–40.

[19] Tac. *Ann*. 4.53.3; see also Pliny, *NH* 7.46. For a recent assessment, see Barrett (n. 12), 198–9.

[20] Syme ([n. 10], 397–419, at 407) judged him 'vigilant all through'. Griffin's analysis of Tacitus' account against that of the *SCPP* causes her to comment ([n. 16], 260): 'Credit should also be given to Tacitus' talent for reading between the lines of official propaganda and to his sceptical attitude towards official accounts, pro-imperial propaganda, and popular beliefs alike.' Against what sources or with whom Tacitus checked his account of Messalina's fall remains unrecoverable. However, without any contrary evidence to suggest that Tacitus was grossly misled, extreme scepticism about his factual accuracy in this instance is based solely on speculative possibilities, runs contrary to what we know of his methods, and is thus untenable. The historian's reliabilty in representing even the content of imperial orations has been well documented in the case of Claudius' speech concerning the leading men of Tres Galliae, an epigraphic copy of which was found at Lugdunum (*ILS* 212; cp. Tac. *Ann*. 11.24); for salient modern studies, see Syme (n. 10), 703, n. 3

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method—echoed in his account of Piso's ruin (Tac. *Ann*. 3.16.1)—is not lightly dismissed when it comes from the pen of Tacitus, who was fully cognizant of the pitfalls inherent in sensational tales surrounding imperial deaths (Tac. *Ann*. 3.19.2, 4.11.2). In any case, the evidence of the *SCPP* renders the conclusion unnecessary that official versions of events would themselves be made up out of whole cloth. What we expect, rather, is that the known facts will be given a particular moral spin that reflects badly on the victim. The train of events seems largely secure, but the issue of character is brought to the fore.

II

The view one holds of Messalina's character has had a determinative effect on how her fall from grace has been interpreted by ancient and modern commentators alike. In the ancient sources, she is depicted as an amoral nymphomaniac who had multiple paramours and could even leave her sleeping husband's side to take up station in a brothel.[21] For such a person, a bigamous marriage to an adulterous lover is hardly inconceivable. Modern scholars have added the excuse of her age: she was a mere child, in her mid-teens, when married to an already middle-aged Claudius.[22] Accepting this view, Messalina's behaviour with Silius is entirely in character and can be taken at face value: an affair that went too far with a silly prank that proved lethal (that is, the alleged formal marriage and Claudius' punishment of participants). Her demise was therefore due to her libidinous nature and her actions with Silius were the product of a sort of madness.[23] The unanimous weight of our ancient testimony stands behind this intrepretation of the Silius affair. Tacitus is typical of this tradition as he records her reaction to Silius' proposal of marriage (*Ann*. 11.26.5):

> segniter eae voces acceptae, non amore in maritum, sed ne Silius summa adeptus sperneret adulteram scelusque inter ancipitia probatum veris mox pretiis aestimaret. nomen tamen matrimonii concupivit ob magnitudinem infamiae cuius apud prodigos novissima voluptas est.
>
> She received his proposal equivocally, not through any love of her husband but out of a fear that Silius, once he had attained the peak, would turn his back on her as an adulteress and soon judge their crime, attempted in a time of peril, at its true value. But she longed to be called his wife because of the towering infamy of it, which is the last pleasure of the licentious.

In other words, Messalina's nature drove her to the excesses that caused her death. In one modern writer's rancorous formulation, the questions that beg answering are, 'Of what ferment of human beings was Messalina the scum; from what ulcer in the story of civilization was she cast up?'[24]

The alternative view is to see Messalina as a cunning and wily agent in court politics

[21] Nymphomaniac: Tac. *Ann*. 11.12.2, 11.34.3, 11.37.5, 12.7.5; [Sen.] *Octavia* 258–9; Dio 60.14.3, 60.22.4–5, 60.27.4; Aur. Vict. *Caes*. 4.12–13. Brothel: Aur. Vict. *Caes*. 4.13, Dio 60 (61).31.1 (who locates it in the palace), Juv. *Sat*. 6.115–32 (who puts Messalina in a city brothel).

[22] See J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* (London, 1974, rev. edn), 103; Furneaux (n. 5), 2.[42]; Scramuzza (n. 2), 90; S. E. Wood, *Imperial Women: A Study in Public Images, 40 B.C.–A.D. 68* (Leiden, 1999), 322, s.v. 'Messalina' (where her birth is dated to *c.* A.D. 25, thus making her about fourteen or fifteen when she married Claudius and a mere twenty-three at her death in A.D. 48).

[23] The author of the *Octavia* (257–69), for instance, uses vocabulary evoking Messalina's unstable and unhappy mental state: *furor*, *demens*, *infelix*.

[24] H. Stadelmann, *Messalina: A Picture of Life in Imperial Rome* (London, 1930), 3.

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who, as a woman, used sex as a political tool.[25] She was no child, but in her early twenties when she married Claudius and thus approaching thirty when she perished.[26] The events of A.D. 48 were therefore either part of a wider plot or a political manoeuvre designed to benefit Messalina somehow, but this fact has been superseded in our sources by the image of a depraved Messalina, which trivializes the whole incident and accords better with Roman male expectations of powerful women. Vestiges of the true situation nevertheless remain to be found between the lines.

This view is more in keeping with modern intrepretations of the Julio-Claudian era in general and depends on a close and nuanced reading of the sources. It has much in its favour. Messalina can be shown to have deliberately ruined rivals, both men and women, during her marriage to Claudius, thereby revealing her political acumen.[27] Her male paramours, goes the argument, were carefully chosen for political advantage and not merely to sate a reckless passion. The register of Messalina's named lovers include Polybius, a powerful freedman advisor to Claudius.[28] Silius himself, as consul-designate, was well connected, and many more men died in the wake of the adultery's discovery, including at least one senator and several named Roman *equites*.[29] The arguments that Tacitus puts into Silius' mouth urging Messalina to marry him, which include mention of accomplices (*conscii*) and the promise of Messalina's continued power (*potentia*), are more overtly political than romantic (Tac. *Ann*. 11.26.2–4). The imperial freedmen were moved to act by fear for their position, which was threatened by Messalina's marriage to another man (Tac. *Ann*. 11.28.1); and when Mnester pleaded for mercy, he pointed out that he would have been among the first to die had Silius come to power (Tac. *Ann*. 11.36.1–2). Clearly, these parties interpreted Messalina's affair with Silius in political terms, indeed as an attempted usurpation. Claudius himself is portrayed as believing that Silius wanted to overthrow him and so dashed off to the Praetorian camp, asking all the way whether he was still emperor and Silius a private citizen (Suet. *Claud*. 36; Tac. *Ann*. 11.31.3). In the midst of the crisis, the Praetorian Prefect, Geta, was considered so unreliable that Narcissus requested the command of the Praetorian cohorts for the day (Tac. *Ann*. 11.33.1–2). On her death, the senate issued decrees removing Messalina's name from inscriptions and her

[25] Levick (n. 2), 56 is representative: 'Messalina should not be seen as an adolescent nymphomaniac; in the main she used sex as a means of compromising and controlling politicians'; similarily Wood (n. 22), 255: 'She was certainly guilty of adultery, but probably also of more than that.' Such a view of imperial women at court appeals to modern sentiments; see, recently, R. A. Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (London, 1992), 211–19; E. Fantham et al. (edd.), *Women in the Classical World* (Oxford, 1994), 308–13; J. Hallett, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family* (Princeton, 1984), 8–13; S. E. Wood, 'Messalina, wife of Claudius: propaganda successes and failures of his reign', *JRA* 5 (1992), 219–34, esp. 233; ead. (n. 22), 8–10, 252–5. Note Tacitus' comment (*Ann*. 3.33.3) that, given licence, otherwise weak women became 'harsh, self-seeking, and keen for authority' (*saevum, ambitiosum, potestatis avidum*).

[26] Syme (n. 10), 437, n. 5: Messalina's half-brother by her mother's second marriage, Faustus Sulla (*PIR*^{2} C 1464), was consul in A.D. 52 and therefore could not have been born any later than A.D. 20; Messalina, as a product of her mother's first marriage, must have been born before that year. Syme's point appears to have been missed by some; see above, n. 22.

[27] The details are laid out in C. Ehrhardt, 'Messalina and the succession to Claudius', *Antichthon* 12 (1978), 55–77; Levick (n. 2), 55–64.

[28] Polybius was later ruined by Messalina, see Dio 60 (61).31.2. It has to be pointed out that her recorded lovers also included several unknown knights and the actor Mnester (see above, n. 4).

[29] Tac. *Ann*. 11.35.6–36.5. See also nn. 4 and 39.

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statues from public and private places, actions usually restricted to cases of treason or attempted *coups d'état*.[30]

All of these details indicate unequivocally that there was a political dimension to what happened. The problem has been to identify what that political dimension might have been. Most of the proposals to date have attempted to reconstruct some sort of formal plot.[31] The goals and membership of this supposed conspiracy remain unclear. Was Messalina aiming to replace Claudius with Silius, were Messalina and Silius out to reform the Principate, or was Messalina attempting to bolster her insecure position at court? Or was the real plot that of the freedmen to bring about Messalina's fall?[32]

It is in the nature of conspiracies to be opaque, but there are serious problems inherent in any view of the Silius affair that proposes an active political plot to explain it, no matter how plausible or cleverly argued it may be. If a conspiracy was at hand, it was a staggeringly inept one. Far from being secretive, the affair (and marriage) of Messalina and Silius was conducted openly and became common knowledge in the city (Tac. *Ann*. 11.12.4, 11.27–8). Following the marriage, no attempt was made by the plotters to garner wider support, none to suborn the praetorians or other troops, save perhaps the *vigiles* and, possibly, some gladiators.[33] Even if the *vigiles* were approached, that is only another indication of gross ineptitude on the part of the conspirators, since the fire brigade was the weakest of the city's three paramilitary detachments;[34] and the support of gladiators hardly constituted the soundest military basis for a *coup*. In fact, recent history had demonstrated the imprudence of relying on

[30] See Tac. *Ann*. 11.38.4–5; *CIL* 6.918 = *ILS* 210, *CIL* 6.4474, *TAM* 11.3.760. See also Barrett (n. 12), 275, n. 90; Wood (n. 25), *passim*, and ead. (n. 22), 249–314.

[31] Barrett ([n. 12], 93) is typical: 'There can surely be little doubt of a conspiracy, albeit an incompetent one.'

[32] The modern proposals advanced thus far are as follows. Silius was plotting to overthrow Claudius and was using Messalina as his tool; see Mehl (n. 5), 60–3; J. Melmoux, 'L'action politique de l'affranchi impérial Narcisse: Un exemple de la place des affranchis dans les entourages impériaux au milieu du 1er siècle', *StClas* 17 (1977), 61–9. Silius wanted to overthrow Claudius but was only part of a wider resentment toward emperors; see D. McAlindon, 'Senatorial opposition to Claudius and Nero', *AJP* 77 (1956), 113–32, esp. 123. Silius and Messalina plotted to overthrow Claudius, with Silius to act as regent for Britannicus; see T. E. J. Wiedemann, 'Tiberius to Nero', in A. K. Bowman, E. Champlin, and A. Lintott (edd.), *The Cambridge Ancient History: The Augustan Empire, 43 B.C.–A.D. 69* (Cambridge, 1996^2), 10.198–255, especially 239–40. Messalina was aiming to establish a 'true senatorial principate' by marrying Silius; see Momigliano (n. 2), 76. Messalina and a privileged clique were aiming to overturn the power of the freedmen, from whom the empress had been separated by the ruin of Polybius; see Levick (n. 2), 66–7. Messalina acted to counter the growing influence of Agrippina the Younger and Nero (then still Domitius), so that Silius was either a replacement for Claudius or an insurance to buttress her position; see Barrett (n. 12), 91–4; M. T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (New Haven, 1984), 29; E. Meise, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Julisch-Claudischen Dynastie* (Munich, 1969), 123–69; Willenbücher (n. 2), 7; Wood (n. 25), 233–4. The freedmen fabricated the entire marriage episode to ruin Messalina; see J. Colin, 'Les vendanges dionysiaques et la légende de Messalina', *LEC* 24 (1956), 23–39. The notion of a plot is now taken as established fact in scholarly works with a focus other than the historical; see e.g. D. E. E. Kleiner, 'Family ties: mothers and sons in elite and non-elite Roman art', in D. E. E. Kleiner and S. B. Matheson (edd.), *I, Claudia II: Women in Roman Art and Society* (Austin, 2000), 44 (Messalina sought to install Silius as emperor in Claudius' stead).

[33] The only evidence for these possibilities is the presence among those executed in the Praetorian camp of Decrius Calpurnianus, the prefect of the *vigiles* and Sulpicius Rufus, procurator of a *ludus*; see Tac. *Ann*. 11.35.7 and above, n. 4.

[34] The other units were the Praetorians and the Urban Cohorts. On the *vigiles*, see M. Durry, *Les cohortes prétoriennes* (Paris, 1938, repr. 1968), 16–20; O. M. Robinson, *Ancient Rome: City Planning and Administration* (London, 1992), 106–10; W. Nippel, *Public Order in Ancient Rome*

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the *vigiles* and gladiators for political support: during the uncertainty surrounding Claudius' accession in A.D. 42, these very groups had deserted the senate *en masse* when it suited them to do so (Jos. *AJ* 19.253–59, *BJ* 2.211–12). Indeed, rather than taking care to advance their plans after the marriage, the supposed conspirators first did nothing and then threw a wild party. Despite the executions that followed in the Praetorian camp, no one was accused of treason, not even Silius.[35] If those executed represented the most visible members of a plot, their identity is not encouraging for the conspiracy view. Aside from Silius there was only one other senator, and he a nobody; aside from the prefect of the *vigiles*, there were several otherwise unremarkable *equites*. The actor Mnester brought up the rear.[36] This was not particularly promising material from which to forge a new regime. Claudius' reaction to Messalina's misconduct was also remarkably restrained when compared with the habitual response of emperors to conspiracies revealed. On this occasion, beyond the lynchings in the Praetorian camp, there was no protracted extirpation of the suspect with its predictable round of denunciations, interrogations, suicides, and executions.[37] Finally, Suetonius lists the various plots against Claudius in one chapter—and he omits the Silius affair (*Claud*. 13). But he does include mention of it under the rubric 'baseless reports of plots' (Suet. *Claud*. 36: *quasdam insidias temere delatas*).

Perhaps, then, there was no plot against Claudius but, as has been suggested by some, the marriage was a political manoeuvre by Messalina to strengthen her position at court in the face of Agrippina's growing influence.[38] However, the patent stupidity of Messalina's actions in this instance sits very uncomfortably with the political cunning otherwise attributed to her by the same scholars who advance such an interpretation of the Silius affair. On a broad perspective, it is hard to see how Messalina, already an empress, would in any way buttress her position at court by risking everything through an open marriage to a mere consul-designate, no matter how well connected he might have been.[39] The benefits to Messalina of wholly alienating Claudius are, to put it mildly, hard to discern. (The possibility that the real plot was by the freedmen against Messalina is treated below, p. 578.) In short, any thesis that advances a conscious political act on Messalina's part as an explanation for her attachment to Silius appears unsatisfactory and unable to explain the facts as we

(Cambridge, 1995), 96–7. One shares Barrett's bemusement at the 'disturbing incompetence' of the supposed plotters; see Barrett (n. 12), 92.

[35] For corroboration of a formally recognized 'plot', Mehl ([n. 5], 63) appeals to Tac. *Ann*. 12.65.3: '[Narcissus said that] Messalina and Silius had been convicted; there once more existed equal grounds for accusing Agrippina' (*convictam Messalinam et Silium; pares iterum accusandi causas esse*). It is not a convincing argument. Tacitus has given us little reason to trust the word of Narcissus. The immediate context of this claim is Narcissus' private assessment of Agrippina's growing power in A.D. 53, and he is ruminating on ways she might be stopped. The freedman is therefore being self-serving, retroactively justifying his ruin of Messalina as part of some formal plot—perhaps he could try the same with Agrippina?

[36] For the names and stations of each, see above, n. 4.

[37] Contrast the lengthy investigation following the attempted revolt in Dalmatia of L. Arruntius Camillus Scribonianus in A.D. 42 (Dio 60.15.5–16.8; Tac. *Ann*. 13.43.3–5; Suet. *Otho* 1.2; Pliny, *Ep*. 3.16.7–8). Similarly intense and prolonged fall-out was generated by the ruin of Sejanus under Tiberius (Tac. *Ann*. 5.8, 5.11, 6.14, 6.19.2–5) or the collapse of the Pisonian conspiracy under Nero (Tac. *Ann*. 15.56–71).

[38] See above, n. 32.

[39] On Silius' pedigree and connections, see Koestermann (n. 5), 3.50; *RE* 3A.69–71 (1927), s.v. 'Silius 4' (Nagl). Barrett ([n. 12], 93–4) appreciates this difficulty and postulates some unreported dramatic episodes or duplicitous advisers to justify Messalina being 'driven to desperate action'.

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have them. The problem of the undoubted political dimension of the whole business remains unresolved.

III

There can be little doubt that the Silius affair has a bizarreness about it, justifying Tacitus' concern that his readers would think his narrative had descended into the realm of fantasy. But perhaps part of the difficulty lies also in the questions asked of the episode by modern scholarship. Issues of character and motive abound when, in reality, they are largely beyond recovery on our current evidence. It is highly unlikely we will ever know what Messalina was really like, or what was going through her head as she embarked on her escapade with Silius.[40] Yet it is on these very bases that most modern attempts to make sense of the episode are founded. Rather, genuinely interesting lessons can be drawn from Messalina's folly when a different perspective is taken. This perspective sidelines the inconclusive debate about Messalina's character, the motive for her marriage to Silius, and the membership and goals of any putative plot. Rather, it focuses on a structural matter at the heart of the Principate: Messalina took action that the Principate as an institution could not tolerate. Given the problem of the succession and the loose arrangements that Augustus and other emperors were forced to adopt to deal with it, sexual misdemeanours by favoured princesses (never mind incumbent empresses) were automatically imbued with a perceived political dimension in a way that the peccadilloes of emperors or princes were not. Princesses before Messalina had made similar mistakes and paid a price no less terrible for having done so. A brief appreciation of the context is therefore needed.

One role of Roman aristocratic women had long been political in purpose: the cementing of alliances between powerful individuals or families.[41] In the Augustan dynastic scheme, a chief sign of imperial favour came through forging a family connection with Augustus himself; and a prominent method of establishing such a connection was to marry candidate princes to Augustus' only natural child, Julia.[42] In the course of her life Julia had three husbands, all considered the successors to Augustus: Marcellus, Agrippa, and Tiberius. Such dynastic marriages continued to take place under the Julio-Claudian emperors who followed Augustus. As a result, the identity of an imperial woman's husband was defined in no small measure in dynastic political terms. The same situation would naturally apply to her paramours. The act of an imperial woman taking a lover thus carried repercussions far beyond individual tastes or particular marital circumstances. Although punishing adultery fell under the private aegis of the *paterfamilias* in any Roman household,[43] the sexual misadventures

[40] See R. Saller, 'Domitian and his successors: methodological traps in assessing emperors', *AJAH* 15 (1990) [2000], 4–18 where he argues our inability to understand the character of any ancient person in a meaningful sense.

[41] See M. Corbier, 'Family behavior of the Roman aristocracy, second century B.C.–third century A.D.', in S. B. Pomeroy (ed.), *Women's History and Ancient History* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 173–96; S. Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore, 1992), 61–71. The tracing of marriage ties is integral to prosopographical analyses of political alliances; see recently, for instance, L. Hofmann-Löbl, *Die Calpurnii: Politisches Wirken und familiäre Kontinuität* (Frankfurt, 1996).

[42] There is a vast bibliography on all matters Augustan. An admirably succinct assessment of the Augustan succession problem remains R. Seager, *Tiberius* (London, 1972), 14–47 (though Seager's notion of regency is unlikely). For more recent treatments, with ample reference to prior work, see J. Bleicken, *Augustus: Eine Biographie* (Berlin, 1998); P. Southern, *Augustus* (London, 1998).

[43] See J. F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington, 1986), 5–11, 127–31.

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of an imperial woman carried added public and political significance. A princess or empress who took an outsider into her bed was simultaneously taking that outsider into the political heart of the dynasty. Since lovers of imperial women would naturally tend to hail from the Roman élite—and so from families who might themselves harbour aspirations for the purple—the problem was even more acute. This is not to say that all lovers of imperial women enjoyed a claim on the throne in actuality. Rather, the nature of the Principate and the role it required of imperial women in the matter of succession ensured that trysts involving imperial women would be perceived as politically threatening by incumbent emperors and their supporters.

It is worth noting, as an aside, that emperors or princes were not faced with the same dilemma. Their lovers, regardless of their status, were unlikely to mount any direct or indirect threat to an incumbent emperor. So, while emperors and princes could indulge in trysts as they saw fit, empresses and princesses were not so fortunate.[44] There was undoubtedly a healthy helping of gender-based double standards involved here as well, but the realities of the imperial succession were sufficient in and of themselves to ground such double standards as much in politics as in Roman male attitudes toward women.

The track record of the imperial house prior to Messalina's fall illustrates all of these points. In 2 B.C., Augustus' daughter, Julia, fell from grace and was exiled to an island. One of her lovers—Iullus Antonius, son of Mark Antony—perished (by his own hand, or another's). Moral failing was the official explanation for Julia's banishment. A decade later, in A.D. 8, Julia's daughter, also Julia, found herself on a small island, banished from Rome purportedly for adultery. Her lover, D. Junius Silanus, went into exile. The dismal litany continued under Tiberius. Agrippina, Germanicus' widow, had a tense relationship with Tiberius. Under the ascendancy of the loathsome Praetorian Prefect L. Aelius Sejanus, she was banished to an island in A.D. 29 and killed four years later, although no moral depravity was even alleged in her case. Drusus' wife, Julia Livilla, embarked on an affair with Sejanus and, along with dozens of others, paid the ultimate price for her association with him after he fell in A.D. 31. Under Gaius' brief reign, Agrippina and Julia Livilla, the emperor's sisters, were banished on charges of adultery with their brother-in-law, M. Aemilius Lepidus, whom Gaius appears to have been favouring as his successor. A commander of the German legions, Cn. Lentulus Gaetulicus, was executed, as was Lepidus. Agrippina and Julia Livilla were recalled by Claudius, but the latter was banished again on a charge of adultery with Seneca (which is presented in the sources as trumped up by Messalina). Next in the series came Messalina and Silius.[45]

Modern scholars have largely rejected the moralizing reasons offered as explanations for such punishments (when they are recorded) and have reconstructed in their stead plots against the emperor or political schemes involving dynastic factions.[46] They

[44] Augustus' peccadilloes are recorded by Suetonius (*Aug*. 69, 71.1). The sexual depravities of Tiberius (Suet. *Tib*. 43–45) or the outrages of Gaius (Suet. *Calig*. 24–25) were not likely to disrupt the dynasty. Claudius too had his concubines and, in the event, it was they who revealed Messalina's infidelity to him (Tac. *Ann*. 11.30.1). Later, a political element did seem to attach to Titus' affair with Berenice of Judaea, but this more likely stemmed from her suspect status as an eastern queen and from the very delicate political circumstances then facing Titus' father, Vespasian, as he pressed his claim to the throne; see B. W. Jones, *The Emperor Titus* (London, 1984), 60–3.

[45] Full documentation for each demotion is traceable in Meise (n. 32).

[46] For a recent and thoroughly documented assessment of the Julia scandals of 2 B.C. and A.D. 8, for instance, see K. A. Raaflaub and J. L. Samons, II, 'Opposition to Augustus', in

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have often been right to do so, since imperial women were surely political animals and could be deeply embroiled in dynastic machinations, in which illicit sexual liaisons doubtless formed a part. Cogent examples of political mischief by imperial women are provided by the careers of Agrippina the Elder, the affair between Livilla and Sejanus, the involvement of Gaius' sisters with Lepidus and Gaetulicus, and, later, Agrippina the Younger's open exercise of power under Claudius and Nero.[47] Therefore, it is entirely understandable why scholars would extend a similar mode of analysis to the less obvious cases, such as the two Julias under Augustus, or Messalina and Silius.

But we should avoid assuming that because some fallen imperial women were plotters, all were. A more profitable course is to accept that in some cases the precise reasons for a fall from grace will forever elude us. Interminable speculations as to the membership and aspirations of supposed conspiracies, where we have no evidence, are largely fruitless. Instead, it should be stressed that the underlying factor that unites all of these demotions is the position in which the Principate, as an institution, put these women, regardless of the degree (if any) of their scheming. It did not matter whether adultery by a princess was politically motivated as part of some dynastic manoeuvre or a plot, or whether it stemmed from entirely personal circumstances—it was *ipso facto* a political act, for the reasons examined above (pp. 575–6). Augustus established the principle when he employed the vocabularly of treason to describe adultery within the imperial family (Tac. *Ann*. 3.24.2–3), and it clearly applied only to the women, not to Augustus' own indiscretions. It is illustrative that when the widowed Agrippina the Elder asked Tiberius in A.D. 26 for permission to remarry to alleviate her loneliness, the emperor refused to reply because of the political ramifications inherent in her request, as Tacitus reports it (Tac. *Ann*. 4.53.1–2). Agrippina died unmarried. Similarly, the cunning Sejanus, who appears to have been aiming to set himself up as Tiberius' successor, first seduced Livilla and then campaigned for her hand (Tac. *Ann*. 4.3.3–4, 4.39–40). It therefore stands to reason that whenever illicit sex involving imperial women was uncovered, the male parties to it had to be punished by exile or death, along with the wayward princess. Such punishment of male associates, then, does not prove that a conspiracy was at hand[48] but reflects how sexual misbehaviour by an imperial princess was in itself a political threat to incumbent emperors and, from their perspective, all guilty parties required correction. Hence also the political reaction of the senate to some of these events: erasure of names and removal of statues, votes of thanks for the emperor's safety, rewards for delators, and so forth.[49] Thus the political dimension of adultery by imperial women lay in the act of adultery itself, and in some cases there is no need to go hunting for plots and schemes.

K. A. Raaflaub and M. Toher (edd.), *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and his Principate* (Berkeley, 1990), 428–31. In these particular cases, there was the added complication of Augustus' moral legislation concerning marriage, which naturally set behavioural benchmarks within the imperial house itself. This added the sin of public embarassment to the list of the Julias' transgressions.

[47] For Sejanus, Livilla, and Agrippina the Elder, see Meise (n. 32), 49–90; Seager (n. 42), 178–223; D. C. A. Shotter, 'Agrippina the Elder: a woman in a man's world', *Historia* 49 (2000), 341–57. For Gaius, his sisters, Lepidus, and Gaetulicus, see Meise (n. 32), 91–122; A. A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (New Haven, 1989), 91–113. On Agrippina the Younger, see Barrett (n. 12).

[48] *Contra*, for example, Barrett (n. 12), 93.

[49] When, for instance, Livilla died (by suicide or execution?) in A.D. 32, forty-four speeches about her punishment were delivered in the senate (Tac. *Ann*. 5.1.1). See also above, n. 30.

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And so we return to Messalina and Silius. What precisely happened in October A.D. 48 is shrouded in uncertainty. The unconcealed adultery was risky enough, but an open marriage involving a sitting empress borders on madness. So it is conceivable that the detail of the marriage was introduced *post factum* as part of the trumped-up charges levelled against the adulterers once they were discovered. On this view, Messalina and Silius paid the ultimate price for their adultery, but the wedding was a fiction concocted by their accusers to bring about her ruin.[50] Three objections can be raised against this proposition. First, all of our ancient sources report the wedding as a fact. This is a circumstance that cannot be disregarded or dismissed out of hand, especially given Tacitus' vouchsafing the reliability of his overall account. Second, the wedding plays a pivotal role in the course of events. Although everyone but Claudius had known of the affair between Silius and Messalina for a year or more, no one had said anything about it to the emperor, even when imperial goods and personnel were transferred to Silius' house (Tac. *Ann*. 11.12.4; Suet. *Claud*. 26.2). The marriage therefore plays a key role in the entire episode, since it is the stimulus that induces the freedmen to risk speaking out and informing the emperor (Tac. *Ann*. 11.28–29). If the marriage is removed, so is the freedmen's motive for breaking their silence. Third, the story of the marriage surely made Claudius look silly, unable to control his own wife's behaviour. Is this really an image of the emperor the palace would be keen to project by first inventing and then propogating a detail that added little to the enormity of what had been going on? For these reasons, it could be argued, the marriage must be retained as a real event.

None of these points, however, secures the historicity of the bigamous marriage. The unanimity of the sources in reporting the marriage may well be the result of a shared reliance on a tradition stemming from the official version of events that would have stressed Messalina's moral depravity. It is precisely the sort of lurid detail that would highlight the victim's moral failings and it thus constitutes the appropriate 'spin' to be expected from the palace's presentation of disruptive internal events (above, p. 569). As for the marriage-as-stimulus, all the freedmen needed in October A.D. 48 was an opportunity to reveal Messalina's adultery to the emperor, and the supposed marriage is not the only possible reason for their breaking their silence. It is clear that *something* happened to prompt the freedmen to act—had they failed in convincing the emperor, their chances of survival were not good—but what that stimulus was we cannot say for sure.[51] We also cannot say how long they had planned their move, for what is presented in Tacitus as an impromptu scheme arrived at under pressure in a matter of hours (Tac. *Ann*. 11.28–9) has, when enacted, the look of a carefully

[50] See Colin (n. 32); Koestermann (n. 5), 3.88. In contrast, for example, Meise (n. 32), 128–32 believes the wedding happened.

[51] Dio (60 [61].31.2) states that the death of Polybius caused the freedmen to turn on Messalina; but Polybius had perished long before the affair with Silius even began, so why did they wait a year to reveal that indiscretion to the emperor? Perhaps Claudius' absence at Ostia provided just the opportunity. Unfortunately, Claudius' movements for the duration of his wife's affair up to October 48 are not reconstructable, but it is possible that he had been at Rome throughout or, at least, that whenever he travelled previously his family had accompanied him. Claudius had started construction of the harbour at Ostia in A.D. 42 and work was ongoing in 47 and 48; see R. Meiggs, *Ostia* (Oxford, 1973[2]), 54–8. That the emperor visited the works from time to time seems certain: Suetonius (*Claud*. 12.3) mentions one visit to Ostia in a context that suggests it took place early in Claudius' reign. But we have no idea how frequent such trips were, or whether Messalina ordinarily accompanied him on them (she did go with him to Britain in A.D. 44; see Suet. *Claud*. 17.3).

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thought-out manoeuvre.[52] Finally, while the story as we have it does indeed present Claudius as inept, it is quite likely that the tradition about this episode was altered in its transmission to the detriment of the emperor's reputation. Despite official deification, denigration of Claudius followed immediately upon his death, with Seneca's vitriolic *Apocolocyntosis* leading the charge.[53] On this perspective, the story of the marriage seems at best greatly exaggerated, at worst a gratuitous and fabulous invention.

In light of all this, it seems safest to admit that the problem of the marriage remains unresolvable on current evidence. It is much more important to appreciate that the wider historical context ensured that the revelation of Messalina's infidelity would be viewed by Claudius and his advisors in political terms, bigamous marriage or not. Narcissus confirms this when he tells Claudius that the people, the senate, and the soldiers have *seen* Messalina's transgression with Silius (Tac. *Ann*. 11.30.5). It was appearances that mattered. The real nature of Messalina's folly was therefore not marrying Silius bigamously (if, indeed, she ever did) but getting involved with him in the first place. Various confidants to the affair may have harboured hopes for political advancement as a result of the liaison, perhaps even Silius himself (as Tacitus presents it), but that does not amount to a formal plot. As has been argued here, we are better off admitting that details of motive and character are entirely beyond recovery—circumstance is more instructive. The reported actions (or inactions) of the protagonists offer a better guide to the importance of this episode than musings about motives. Those actions tell us that (i) a formal plot by Messalina and Silius is highly unlikely; (ii) the political dimension of the event lay in Messalina's act of adultery itself, exacerbated by her choice of a high-born lover; and (iii) precedent clearly showed that misdemeanours such as this by imperial women would be interpreted as politcally subversive, whether or not they were intentionally so. The role of human passions, not noted for their obedience to reason, ought not to be discounted entirely from consideration of this curious episode (as it so often has) but, regardless, Messalina had crossed a clear line in the sand and there was already a long and sorry tradition of punishing analogous behaviour among princesses. It was a lesson seldom learned twice.

The Pennsylvania State University GARRETT G. FAGAN
ggf2@psu.edu

[52] It will be remembered that Tacitus has been found guilty of conflating chronology for dramatic effect (see above, n. 17).

[53] See Levick (n. 2), 187–97. Claudius' subsequent reputation underwent partial rehabilitation at various junctures (for example, in the Flavian period), but the tradition of a passive emperor, a cipher to his wives and freedmen, was entrenched early on. Since the Messalina–Silius marriage is practically the incarnation of that tradition, it may be regarded with some suspicion.

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