

## Snow White's Apple And Claudius' Mushrooms: A Look at the Use of Poison in the Early Roman Empire Connie Galatas

In comparison to the Roman Republic, the Early Empire witnessed an increase in the number of suspected poisonings. In the past, scholars have emphasized how in most cases women were the primary suspects and culprits in terms of preparing or administering the poison. However, this emphasis is problematic. On the one hand, women were not the only ones to use poison as a weapon. In addition, this approach ignores whether the poisonings themselves were historically plausible. By challenging the historicity of the poisonings themselves, one questions the motive(s) of an ancient author to record a false event. Cilliers and Retiefs suggest that the use of poison in the historical narrative helps explain events during a time of political instability.<sup>1</sup> However, it also seems to be used by the ancient authors as a literary device to denote a degeneration of Roman values.

The following will illustrate that not all poisoning under the Julio-Claudians were feasible and that some reports were used by the ancient authors to symbolize the declining state of Rome; especially during a time of political crisis. Firstly, it will discuss the Roman representation of poisoning in the historical and literary tradition. Secondly, it will examine two case studies: the poisoning of Claudius and his son Britannicus. It seems that the former was poisoned whereas the latter was not. Thus, this paper moves away from the traditional scholarly debate concerning the association of women and the use of poison, by calling into question the historicity of the poisonings themselves.

To determine whether the poisonings of Claudius and Britannicus are plausible and valid, it is necessary to examine Roman knowledge and representation of poison in a historical and literary context. Most scholars agree that *venenum* has three meanings: "remedy, poison, and magic drug or abortive"<sup>2</sup> and that the qualifying adjective of *bonum* or *malum* helps identify between the three. In addition, "*veneficium* means poisoning and practicing sorcery, while *veneficus* or *venefica* was applied to a poisoner or maker of drugs."<sup>3</sup> In comparison to the Greek word *pharmakon*, *venenum* "vacillated be-

<sup>1</sup> Cilliers, L., Retief, R.P., "Poisons, Poisoning and the Drug Trade in Ancient Rome," in *Akroterion*, (vol.45, 2000), 99.

<sup>2</sup> Kaufman, David B. "Poison and Poisoning among the Romans," in *Classical Philology*, (vol. 27, no.2, April 1932), 156; Cilliers, L., Retief, R.P., "Poisons, Poisoning and the Drug Trade in Ancient Rome," in *Akroterion*, (vol.45, 2000), 89.

<sup>3</sup> Kaufman, David B. 156

tween a substance and an effect” and could either mean to harm or cure.<sup>4</sup> There are also different theories behind the etymology of *venenum*. Some argue that the word is derived from wine (*vinum*) or from veins (*venae*) since both were ways of administering poison,<sup>5</sup> while the most common interpretation is that it is derived from Venus to “mean a love potion.”<sup>6</sup> During the Republic and especially during the Early Empire “love” was taken out of the equation and replaced by “deadly.”

Whether dealing with historical cases of poisoning in the Republic or the Early Empire, women are usually the prime suspects or culprits. Livy records the earliest case of poisoning in 331 BC, in which 170 matrons were found guilty of making poison and administering it to their husbands. He states that “[b]efore that day there had never been a public inquiry into charges of poisoning in Rome. The case was regarded as an ill omen, and it appeared that the women’s minds were possessed rather than depraved.”<sup>7</sup> Other incidents of poisoning include the Bacchanalia affair in 186 BC, followed by the accusations against Hostilia who tried to kill her husband so that her son, from a previous marriage, could become consul.<sup>8</sup> Two hundred years later, Agrippina the Younger supposedly mimics Hostilia’s actions by poisoning Claudius in order for Nero to be declared emperor.<sup>9</sup> By the Early Empire, women such as Martina and Locusta, are described and depicted as ‘professional poisoners’ being paid to concoct a variety of poisons for their employers.<sup>10</sup>

Cases of poisoning were just as popular in the literary context as they were in the historical tradition. Juvenal, for instance, warns stepsons’ of “Mummy’s poison pies”<sup>11</sup> and claims that a “distinguished lady” has the “perfect dose” of poison for her husband – “old wine with a dash of parching toad’s blood.”<sup>12</sup> He also describes the female poisoner Locusta, who is supposedly responsible for creating the poisons that killed Claudius and Britannicus.<sup>13</sup> In one of his satires, a woman who poisons her husband has done better than Locusta; learning to bury the blackened body.<sup>14</sup> Horace mentions how the poisoner Canidia was known to “cow her opponents with poison”<sup>15</sup> and how dinner guests, wishing to insult their host, would not touch their food “as if it were prepared by [her].”<sup>16</sup> Thus, both the historical and literary traditions portray women as the primary manufacturers and administrators of poison.

These examples have led individuals such as Currie, Hallissy, Rutland and Wood to comment on the association between women and the use of poison. According to one interpretation, poison is a

<sup>4</sup> Currie, Sarah, “Poisonous Women and Unnatural History in Roman Culture,” in *Parchments of Gender*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 154.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 156-8. In most cases, poison was administered through wine, however the Romans were also aware that it can be administered by means of injections.

<sup>6</sup> Kaufman, David B. “Poison and Poisoning among the Romans,” in *Classical Philology*, (vol. 27, no.2, April 1932), 156.

<sup>7</sup> Livy. 8.18.

<sup>8</sup> Livy. 39.08-19, *Epitoma* 48.

<sup>9</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.65-67; Suet. Claudius, 44; Cass. Dio, *Dio’s Roman History*, 60.34.2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 2.74.2: According to Tacitus, Martina was a close friend to Plancina who was accused, along with Piso, of poisoning of Germanicus; 12.66.2: Locusta was hired by Agrippina the Younger to poison Claudius; 13.15.3: Locusta was also hired by Nero to poison Britannicus.

<sup>11</sup> Juvenal. *Satires*. 6.629-31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.69-70.

<sup>13</sup> Suet. *Nero*. 33; Tac. *Ann.* 12.66.2 for Claudius, 13.15.3 for Britannicus.

<sup>14</sup> Juvenal. *Satires*, 1.71-72. This was one sign that an individual had been poisoned.

<sup>15</sup> Horace. *Satires*. 2.148.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 2.8.90-95.

feminine weapon, revolving around the concept of deception and manipulation:<sup>17</sup>

[...] poison is an insidious equalizer of strength in the battle of the sexes. The poisoner uses superior secret knowledge to compensate for physical inferiority. A weak woman planning a poison is as deadly as a man with a gun, but because she plots in secret, the victim is the more disarmed.<sup>18</sup>

Currie challenges the assumption that poison is associated with women because it serves as an 'equalizer'. She argues that poison had to do with the concept of the 'uncanny': "not only did it alienate the body, it also manifested a persistent residue of the magical."<sup>19</sup> Its association with women "was predicated upon sexual difference and represents the intertwined horrors of death and castration."<sup>20</sup> Whether poison is seen as an equalizer of the sexes or a manifestation of the uncanny, it is usually associated with female power.

However, this argument concerning the role of poison and women's power is flawed. The preparation and administration of poison was not always done by women. There are other examples where men were accused of poisoning their relatives or their peers within society as a means to achieve power or wealth. For instance, Cicero accuses the elder Oppianicus of being a "villain and poisoner"; his victims were his own wife, his brother's wife, his brother, and Cluentius.<sup>21</sup> In addition during the time of Augustus, Nonius Aspernas was charged with poisoning 130 guests.<sup>22</sup> Not only was poison used to eliminate potential rivals for political power, but Pliny the Elder seems to justify its use for euthanasia and capital punishment:

... nay, even poison [nature] may be thought to have been invented out of compassion for us, lest, when we were weary of life, hungry, the death most alien to earth's beneficence, should consume us with slow decay [...] lest we should be tortured by the perverted punishment of the noose which imprisons the breath whose departure it is seeking.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, poison was not some sort of secret tool that only women were familiar with and used. Roman society seemed to be awfully aware of the effects of this silent but deadly weapon.

What is interesting is that the certain poisonings were questioned by the ancient authors. Livy states that: "There is one thing I should very much like to think was falsely put on record – namely, that those whose death made this year notorious for the plague were in fact killed by poison; but I must set down the affair as it has come down to us, lest I destroy confidence in any of my authorities."<sup>24</sup> It is questionable why some authors would claim that individuals were poisoned if they were not. Cilliers and Retief provide a compelling argument that during a time of political crisis and instability, poison was

<sup>17</sup> Hallissy, Margaret, *Venomous woman: fear of the female in literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>19</sup> Currie, Sarah, "Poisonous Women and Unnatural History in Roman Culture," in *Parchments of Gender*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 148.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>21</sup> Kaufman, David B. "Poison and Poisoning among the Romans," in *Classical Philology*, (vol. 27, no.2, April 1932), 158.

<sup>22</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 56.

<sup>23</sup> Pliny, *NH*, 2.156.

<sup>24</sup> Livy, 8.18.

used as a “scapegoat for unexplained phenomena.”<sup>25</sup> These inexplicable incidents usually concerned the sudden deaths of prominent figures within Roman society. As such, the increase in the amount of recorded poisonings in the first century was due to the “ambition and political intrigues” of society witnessing individuals struggling for power.<sup>26</sup> If this explanation is correct, then one can begin to question whether individuals were actually poisoned, or whether these reported cases were fabricated by the ancient authors to explain events during a political crisis.

The presence of these poisonings in the historical narrative do more than explain the unexplainable: they also show the degeneration of Roman values and traditions. As Galen wrote “the main difference that lies between nourishing food and a deleterious drug is that the latter masters the forces of the body, whereas the former is mastered by them.”<sup>27</sup> In Currie’s words “poisoning, unlike other forms of killing, spectacularized the familiar body and rendered it strange. It controlled or puppetized its victims, even compelling them to be a spectator of their own death.”<sup>28</sup> Poison was not an honourable weapon since it was based on secrecy and deception; preventing the opponent from being aware that they are in a state of war and that they need to defend themselves.<sup>29</sup> More importantly, it challenged Rome’s traditional views of honour and glory gained by fighting and dying on the battlefield. The use of poison not only robbed an individual from achieving fame, however, it removed the framework for them to do so. The increase in the number of poisonings in turn reflect and comment on the political landscape of Rome in the first century AD. With the emergence of the empire, came the deterioration of Rome’s customary values. Therefore, the accounts of poisoning under the Julio-Claudians can be explained by two factors: first, it helped organize and clarify the narrative of events during a time of instability; second, the empire challenged the traditional values of Rome in terms of facing an opponent and using physical strength to emerge victorious. The remainder of this paper will examine two case studies in order to illustrate when an account of poisoning is valid and when one is used to fit the paradigm mentioned above.

The story of Claudius’ poisoning is well recorded amongst the ancient authors. Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio agree that Agrippina decided to poison her husband when he began favouring his own biological son Britannicus. Cassius Dio explains that “[Claudius] would not endure [Agrippina’s] behaviour, but was preparing to put an end to her power to cause his son to assume the *toga virilis* and to declare him heir to the throne.”<sup>30</sup> According to Suetonius, Claudius had already granted Britannicus the toga of manhood “though still young and immature” so that “the Roman people [could] have finally a true Caesar.”<sup>31</sup> Despite these minor differences in the sources, it seems that Agrippina’s motives to poison Claudius was to secure the throne for her son Nero and to preserve her own political power.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from these individual motives, a discussion about the weapon of choice is necessary to prove or disprove the historicity of Claudius poisoning. Pliny explains in his *Natural Histories* that to eat mushrooms was rather rash since “although they make choice eating they have been brought into

<sup>25</sup> Cilliers, L., Retief, R.P., “Poisons, Poisoning and the Drug Trade in Ancient Rome,” in *Akroterion*, (vol.45, 2000), 88.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 99.

<sup>27</sup> Galen. 3.7.161.

<sup>28</sup> Currie, Sarah, “Poisonous Women and Unnatural History in Roman Culture,” in *Parchments of Gender*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 147-148.

<sup>29</sup> Hallissy, Margaret, *Venomous woman: fear of the female in literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>30</sup> Cass. Dio, 60.34.1.

<sup>31</sup> Suet. *Claudius*. 43.

<sup>32</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.66.1; Suet. *Claudius*. 44 ; Cass. Dio, 60.34.2.

disrepute by a glaring instance of murder, being the means used to poison the emperor Tiberius Claudius."<sup>33</sup> Even prior to Claudius' death, Pliny's work suggests knowledge about poisonous mushrooms. He lists that mushrooms grown near a serpent's hole or near a piece of rusty iron are poisonous.<sup>34</sup> However, Grimm-Samuel argues that these "suggestions [...] have no basis in fact. The unfounded belief that fungi growing around rusty nails or rotten rags, or near serpent's holes appears in a Greek poem about 200 years before."<sup>35</sup> Even though the Romans were aware that some mushrooms were edible while others were poisonous, they did not have an accurate system to distinguish between the two.

Grimm-Samuel's article ignores these problems and focuses on the symptoms that Claudius is described as having prior to his death. She claims that the mushrooms that Claudius ate belonged to the genus *Amanita*, which contains some

widely sought-after edible species, but it also contains the most merciless killer: *A. phalloides*. The symptoms of *A. phalloides* poisoning are characteristic and almost always lead to a slow and terrible death. Contrary to the effects of other poisonous mushrooms, no discomfort is felt for quite some time. There is a symptom-free incubation period lasting 10 to 15 hours, during which time the mushrooms are completely digested and the toxins are absorbed into the bloodstream.<sup>36</sup>

Both Tacitus' and Suetonius' chronology of events supports Grimm-Samuel's assumption that Claudius ate some poisonous mushrooms before his death on October 13, 54A.D. In Tacitus' narrative, there are two phases of the poisoning. Initially Claudius was served poisonous mushrooms; though he was able to recover through the "opening of his bowels."<sup>37</sup> A second round of poison was administered when the doctor Xenophon was called to "aid his efforts at vomiting" by placing a feather down his throat. The good doctor, however, was employed by Agrippina and as such the "feather was smeared with a quick-seizing poison."<sup>38</sup> Although Tacitus' version of events fits well with Grimm-Samuel's chronology, it is still problematic. If Claudius was able to recover from the initial dose of poison, then why was Xenophon called to assist his efforts in vomiting? The summoning of Xenophon suggests that Claudius did not fully recover from the first poisoning, let alone the need for a second measure of poison to be administered.

In comparison to Tacitus, Suetonius provides two accounts of the poisoning. In the first story, he records that the poison was administered at a "feast with the priests on the citadel and was given to him by his taster, the eunuch Halotus."<sup>39</sup> The second version, similar to Tacitus' account, claims that at a family dinner Agrippina offered Claudius a dish of poisonous mushrooms.<sup>40</sup> Suetonius also records in the same passage the "different versions for the next part of the story." On the one hand, some authors described how Claudius was rendered speechless and was in pain until he suddenly died the next morning. Others ancient authors state that he was given a second dose of poison, which was added to some porridge "with the pretence that he needed food to revive him in his weakened state" after hav-

<sup>33</sup> Pliny, *NH*, 22.92.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.94-95.

<sup>35</sup> Grimm-Samuel, Veronika, "On the Mushroom that Deified the Emperor Claudius," in *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, (vol. 41, no.1, 1991), 180.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>37</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.67.1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 12.67.2.

<sup>39</sup> Suet. *Claudius*. 44.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

ing vomited all night.

Regardless of the multitude of versions, the historicity of Claudius' poisoning is still plausible. Modern scientific studies suggest that Claudius must have eaten an *A. phalloides* specimen which "are abundant in late September and early October" and "are common to Europe, including Italy."<sup>41</sup> If so, he must have eaten them prior to his dinner with Agrippina because it takes 10-15 hours for these mushrooms to be digested, releasing the toxins into the blood and causing what the cynical would call discomfort. This would support Suetonius' initial claim that Claudius was poisoned at a dinner with the priests, and Cassius Dio's and Tacitus' statement that after Agrippina's meal (supposedly 10-15 hours later) he felt immediate pain. Although this scientific analysis proves that Claudius was poisoned, it nevertheless has problems and implications. The first is that Grimm-Samuel challenges the order of events, yet, does not challenge the symptoms themselves. As such, if one questions the symptoms experience by Claudius, one can challenge whether he truly ate an *A. phalloides* mushroom. The second implication is that she challenges Tacitus', Suetonius' and Cassius Dio's claim that it was Agrippina who fed Claudius his poisonous dish. If we accept that it was his eunuch Halotus who poisoned him, one questions the reason(s) he did so. Therefore, although the scientific approach is plausible, it still proves to be problematic with the ancient historical sources.

Ignoring this scientific approach, the poisoning of Claudius is still historically truthful. Firstly, it is implied in Tacitus, and explicitly stated by Suetonius, that Claudius attended two dinners wherein he was supposedly poisoned. Perhaps the poisoning was accidental, where the chef mistook some poisonous mushrooms with edible ones. However if this was the case, then one questions why other individuals present were not poisoned. One may argue that only Claudius ate poisonous mushrooms, yet, it seems improbable and highly coincidental that he was poisoned at both meals while everyone else was not. Furthermore, unlike the death of Germanicus, who was murdered by a mysterious poison, Tacitus, Pliny, Suetonius and Cassius Dio are consistent in identifying what poisoned Claudius: mushrooms. Tacitus even states that the events were well known and recorded by contemporary authors.<sup>42</sup>

As stated above, the Romans knew that some mushrooms were poisonous; though it is questionable to what extent they could have distinguished them from the edible ones. If the Romans had a difficult time distinguishing between edible and poisonous mushrooms, they also could have had a difficult time in understanding the poison's effects.<sup>43</sup> Most cases in the historical tradition portray poison as having an immediate effect. In Livy 8.18, the women who poisoned their husbands were forced to drink their own concoctions and were immediately killed after doing so. Similarly under Nero, Locusta was forced to create an instant poison to kill Britannicus lest she face the hand of Nero again.<sup>44</sup> However, not all poisonings were swift. While facing a slow and painful death, Germanicus tells his wife, Agrippina the Elder, to avenge him.<sup>45</sup> Regardless of the time it took for a poison to work, the Romans were able to identify certain symptoms of poisoning such as excessive vomiting, sweating and stomach pains.<sup>46</sup> "Même si les Romains avaient en chimie et en toxicologies des connaissances moins avancées que les nôtres, il sera toujours impossible de *prouver* qu'ils n'en savaient pas plus qu'ils ne le disent:

<sup>41</sup> Grimm-Samuel, Veronika, "On the Mushroom that Deified the Emperor Claudius," in *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, (vol. 41, no.1, 1991), 181-82.

<sup>42</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.67.1.

<sup>43</sup> Cilliers, L., Retief, R.P., "Poisons, Poisoning and the Drug Trade in Ancient Rome," in *Akroterion*, (vol.45, 2000), 98.

<sup>44</sup> Suet. *Nero*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 2.69.1-2.71.5.

<sup>46</sup> Grimm-Samuel, Veronika, "On the Mushroom that Deified the Emperor Claudius," in *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, (vol. 41, no.1, 1991), 182.

ce ne sont pas là des choses qu'on crie sur les toits."<sup>47</sup>

Whether scientific or historical, the majority of the evidence points towards the historicity of Claudius' poisoning. Although it is easier to dismiss the event entirely on the basis of numerous contradictions, Claudius' poisoning is not only salvageable yet plausible. The sources themselves record various versions, but, they reach one decisive conclusion: that the death of Claudius was brought about by an initial digestion of poisonous mushrooms. The second dose of poison, either from a feather or porridge, could have been used by the authors to either explain the delay of the first poisoning or to explain the immediate death of Claudius after a brief recovery period. However, not all poisonings under the Julio-Claudians are believable or possible. Not only are there many irreconcilable statements in the poisoning of Britannicus, yet, the authors seem to use the episode to explain events during a time of political instability and to illustrate the degradation of Roman values under Nero. To illustrate this paradigm, the following will focus on whether Britannicus was a threat to Nero and the events of the poisoning.

There are two individuals with the motives to kill Britannicus: namely Agrippina the Younger and her son Nero. The sources depict some tension between Britannicus and Nero, but it was limited to name calling. According to Suetonius, Britannicus kept calling Nero Ahenobarbus, whereas Tacitus states that he called him Domitius.<sup>48</sup> In both instances, it was Agrippina who was upset; complaining to Claudius that the "adoption was being spurned" by such activities.<sup>49</sup> Britannicus seemed to pose a potential threat to Agrippina's political power as the biological son of Claudius. In an effort to preserve her own position in society, Agrippina deprived Britannicus of accumulating any power:

While Nero was being advanced, Britannicus received neither honour nor care [...] and in consequence Nero became a person of importance and his name was on everybody's lips, whereas in the case of Britannicus many did not know even whether he was living, and the rest regarded him as insane and an epileptic; for this was the report that Agrippina gave out.<sup>50</sup>

Most of Britannicus' supporters were removed by Agrippina, who convinced Claudius to "put to exile or death each of his son's best tutors and installed as his guards those provided by her."<sup>51</sup> Even though Britannicus might have been a threat to Nero and his mother as the biological son of Claudius, "his advantage was nullified by Messalina's death."<sup>52</sup> The removal of the joint praetorian prefects, Geta and Crispinus, who were supporters of Messalina, further deprived Britannicus of any powerful political supporters.<sup>53</sup> The praetorian prefect was subsequently held by Burrus, who was loyal to Agrippina.<sup>54</sup> Even prior to Claudius' poisoning, it is debated whether Britannicus received the toga of manhood.<sup>55</sup>

In comparison to his mother, Nero saw Britannicus as a threat to his singing career as opposed to his position as emperor. Suetonius states that Nero "no less poisoned Britannicus because of

<sup>47</sup> Dubuisson, Michel, « La mort de Britannicus: lecture critique de Tacite », in *L'Antiquité classique*, (vol.68, 1999), 159.

<sup>48</sup> Suet. *Nero*. 7; Tac. *Ann.* 12.41.3.

<sup>49</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.41.3.

<sup>50</sup> Cass. Dio. *Ep.* 60.32.5, 60.33.9.

<sup>51</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.41.3.

<sup>52</sup> Morford, Mark P. O. "The Training of Three Roman Emperors," in *Phoenix*, (vol. 22, no.1, Spring 1968), 58; Wood, Susan, *Imperial women: a study in public images, 40 B.C.-A.D. 68* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1999), 256.

<sup>53</sup> Morford, Mark P. O. "The Training of Three Roman Emperors," in *Phoenix*, (vol. 22, no.1, Spring 1968), 63.

<sup>54</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.42.1.

<sup>55</sup> Suet. *Claudius* 43: Britannicus was given the toga virilis before Claudius death. Cassius Dio. 60.34.1: Claudius wanted to give him the title but was poisoned before he could do so.

the competition he posed in singing [...] than through fear that one day he would prevail in public favour through memory of his father.”<sup>56</sup> Somville writes, “ni César ni Britannicus ne furent rois, mais c’est sur fond de royauté que s’accomplit leur double destin tragique et exemplaire.”<sup>57</sup> The author suggests that Britannicus’ image during the Saturnalia threatened Nero’s emperorship.<sup>58</sup> In the hopes of embarrassing his step-brother, Nero ordered Britannicus to sing at a public event; unfortunately his plan backfired when Britannicus began reciting a poem “in which it was indicated that he had been turned out of his paternal abode and the supremacy.”<sup>59</sup>

Despite these different motives, the ancient sources agree that Nero decided to poison Britannicus after Agrippina threatened to support him.<sup>60</sup> Agrippina feared that she was losing her control over Nero and thought that siding with Britannicus would force Nero to listen to her. Britannicus, on his own, was not a threat to Nero; his supporters had been executed or exiled and he himself had no honours but being the son of the emperor. However, even his paternity was called into question after Messalina’s death.<sup>61</sup> Agrippina on the other hand, did have prestige in the imperial court and “posed a genuine and very serious threat to Nero’s security on his throne.”<sup>62</sup> One question to what extent her threat of elevating Britannicus could be materialized. For the past few years, Britannicus was denied any honours, quasi-imprisoned in the palace and was denied access to his father because of Agrippina.<sup>63</sup> It is doubtful whether Britannicus would trust or even engage in a plot with Agrippina, since it was because of her that he was denied any power in the first place. As such, if Britannicus was not a threat, it calls into question the need for Nero to remove him from all spheres of life.

The record of the poisoning is also as questionable as the motives. Tacitus explains that since “[Nero] did not dare to openly order the slaughter of his brother, he engineered things secretly and ordered poison to be prepared.”<sup>64</sup> Poisoning Britannicus during a public dinner with invited guests to watch is contrary to being secretive. Moreover, Britannicus had individuals sampling his food due to the fear of poisoning that had emerged in the imperial court.<sup>65</sup> Despite this precaution, the poisoning still occurred. After “he spurned a drink for being so scalding hot, the poison was added in cold water” and given to him.<sup>66</sup> Dubuisson raises an interesting observation:

Tacite raisonne logiquement: s’il y a bien eu crime, il ne peut en effet s’être produit que de cette façon, puisque l’eau froide n’a pas, elle, été goûtée. Mais tout amateur de roman policier formulera aussitôt une objection qui me paraît grave. Si l’on se place, comme il faut le faire, au point de vue non du résultat, mais de *la préparation* de l’acte,

<sup>56</sup> Suet. *Nero*. 33.

<sup>57</sup> Somville, Pierre, “Deux Royauté Maléfiques: César et Britannicus,” in *Les Études Classiques*, (vol. 56, 1988), 337.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 341.

<sup>59</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.15.2.

<sup>60</sup> Cassius Dio 61.7.4, Tac. *Ann.* 13.14.2.

<sup>61</sup> Wood, Susan, *Imperial women: a study in public images, 40 B.C.-A.D. 68* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1999), 256.

<sup>62</sup> Rogers, Robert Samuel, “Heirs and Rivals to Nero.” in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, (vol. 86, 1955), 199.

<sup>63</sup> Cass. Dio. 60.32.5.

<sup>64</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.15.3.

<sup>65</sup> Kaufman, David B. “Poison and Poisoning among the Romans,” in *Classical Philology*, (vol. 27, no.2, April 1932), 148.

<sup>66</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.16.2.



comment expliquer que les auteurs du crime aient pu être sûrs que l'eau ne serait pas goûtée?<sup>67</sup>

One explanation could be the inadequacy and inefficiency of these official tasters. However, there are other anomalies in the poisoning.

Titus, who was present at the meal, had sampled some of Britannicus' food, and although he fell ill he was able to recover.<sup>68</sup> This passage raises two concerns: all sources state that Britannicus reacted immediately to the poisoning, as such, so why would Titus taste his food or drink? Furthermore, if the poison that Locusta concocted was so deadly that it instantly killed a pig, why would Titus have recovered?<sup>69</sup> Dubuisson claims that the quickest poison that we know takes twenty minutes to affect the whole body.<sup>70</sup> Although this explains why Titus would sample Britannicus' food, it challenges the notion that he died instantaneously. In addition, unlike the situation with Claudius, the poison itself is very ambiguous. There are no poison feathers, porridges or mushrooms. Instead, Tacitus claims the poison was mixed in water and Suetonius' states that it was administered in his food. However, if there was a taster then he would have been affected by the poison much like Titus.

There are too many irreconcilable differences in Britannicus' poisoning, from the motives to the consumption of the poison, to suggest that it actually happened. Rather than reporting the details of the poisoning itself, the ancient sources emphasize Nero's involvement as a reflection of his character. An image quickly forms of Nero as some sort of madman who sets fire to Rome to build his golden palace and persecutes the Christians to avoid suspicion of his guilt.<sup>71</sup> After 'poisoning' his brother, Nero threatens to do the same to his political opponents and even contemplates poisoning the whole senate.<sup>72</sup> During the initial years of Nero's reign, he did not resort to such tactics. For instance, he banished Sulla to an island.<sup>73</sup> It is curious why Sulla, a far greater threat than Britannicus, was allowed to live, whereas Britannicus was poisoned.<sup>74</sup> One explanation is that the events surrounding the death of Britannicus mark a transition in the image of Nero. In order to poison Britannicus, he removes Locusta from prison, forces her to concoct an immediate and effective poison and then rewards her for a job well done by giving her an estate, immunity from prosecution and pupils to learn from her.<sup>75</sup> Whether showing no respect for the senate, rewarding acts of manipulation and cowardice through the use of poison, aiding and abetting criminals, or even killing his brother, Nero embodies the opposite of traditional Roman values. In addition, the poisoning of Britannicus is used by the ancient authors to explain the political instability between Nero and his mother. Britannicus was not a threat to Nero's emperorship unless he had the support of Agrippina. However, it is unlikely that Britannicus would cooperate with the woman who was responsible for his father's death and for his own political weaknesses.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Dubuisson, Michel, « La mort de Britannicus: lecture critique de Tacite ». in *L'Antiquité classique*, (vol.68, 1999), 257.

<sup>68</sup> Suet. *Titus*, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Suet. *Nero*, 33.

<sup>70</sup> Dubuisson, Michel, « La mort de Britannicus: lecture critique de Tacite ». in *L'Antiquité classique*, (vol.68, 1999), 259.

<sup>71</sup> Tact. *Ann.* 15.38.1-42.2.

<sup>72</sup> Suet. *Nero*, 43.

<sup>73</sup> Tact. *Ann.* 13.47

<sup>74</sup> Rogers, Robert Samuel, "Heirs and Rivals to Nero." in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* (vol. 86, 1955), 201.

<sup>75</sup> Suet. *Nero*, 33.

<sup>76</sup> Wood, Susan, *Imperial women: a study in public images, 40 B.C.-A.D. 68* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1999), 268.

Although the number of recorded poisonings increased from the time of the Republic to the Early Empire not all these cases were plausible, as illustrated with the examples of Claudius and his son Britannicus. There are two reasons why the ancient authors claimed that individuals were poisoned in their narratives. Firstly, it was used as a literary device to explain the inexplicable, especially in terms of the volatile political situation of the empire. Secondly, it was used to comment on the deterioration of Roman values under the Julio-Claudians and the disintegration of the Republic. The case study of Britannicus illustrates this paradigm. Thus, mushrooms might have been the food of the gods since it deified Claudius,<sup>77</sup> but one can use the cold water offered to Britannicus as a refreshing view that not all cases of poisoning were historically accurate or plausible.

<sup>77</sup> Cass. Dio. 60.35.4.

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