

# THE 'CRIMES' OF AGRIPPINA THE YOUNGER



*Nero before the body of his mother, Agrippina the Younger, 1887*



BY MARY NAPLES

A regicide, a perennial poisoner, a murderer, an incestophile, a seductress, and a detestable profligate... this is what the ancient chroniclers would have us believe about Julia Agrippina the Minor, better known as Agrippina the Younger (16 CE-59 CE).

Indeed, some of her crimes were so heinous they would put a blush on the sallow cheeks of Lady Macbeth.

But, the real question is, are the accusations true?

Agrippina was the great-granddaughter of the Divine Caesar Augustus (63 BCE- 14 CE) and sister, wife and mother of the three final Julio-Claudian emperors.

She was the first ever living Augusta and both an empress and a co-regent in her own right. So why the mistreatment by ancient historians? Who was Agrippina the Younger and why do stories of the depths of her





depravity encircle her to this day?

We know Agrippina the Younger primarily through the myopic lenses of three ancient chroniclers: Tacitus (56 CE-120 CE), Suetonius (69 CE-122 CE) and Cassius Dio (155 CE-235 CE).

These three historians wrote during the reigns of emperors who were hostile toward the Julio-Claudian clan anywhere from fifty to two-hundred years after she died.

The credibility of these three men is the question that plagues their outrageous claims about Agrippina.

In addition to being deeply misogynistic, it was acceptable for historians in ancient Rome to be biased and moralistic.

For example, unless they are demure and retiring, in his *Annals*, Tacitus—the most prolific of the three—seldom says a kind word about women and tells us that the country was transformed when Claudius married Agrippina. “Complete obedience was accorded to a woman,” he huffs. He is also prone to reading his subject’s minds. What perception!

Likewise, Suetonius’ *Lives of the Caesars*—when he mentions women at all—relies on rumor

for many of his narratives, seldom distinguishing word of mouth from actual facts. While equally hostile to women, Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* also has a pronounced bias against the Julio-Claudian clan in particular, and comes to us in fragments that have been redacted from Byzantine monks in the Middle Ages.

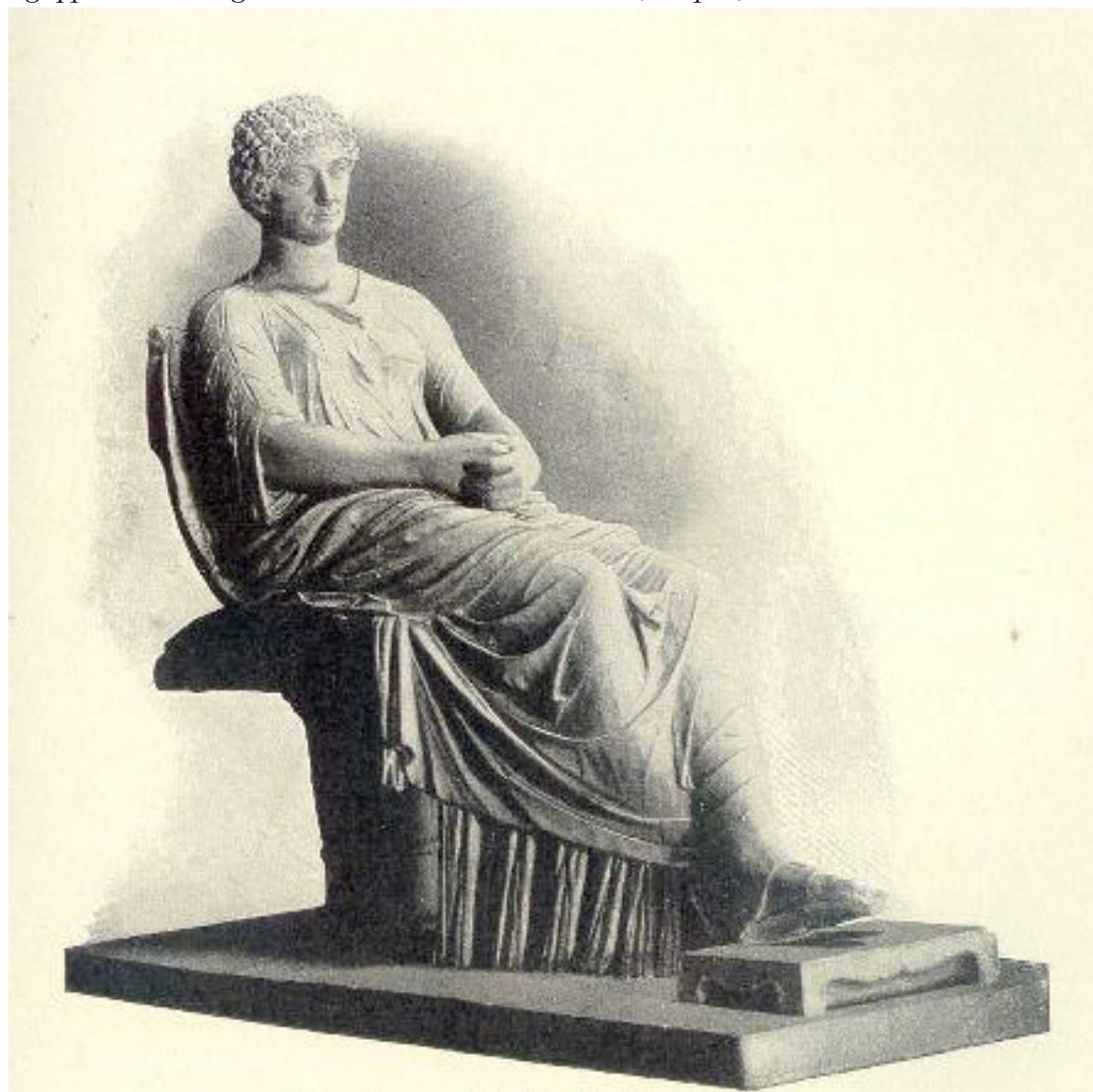
Besides these primary three, another source that crops up from time to time is Pliny the Elder (23 CE-79 CE) who was more or less a contemporary of Agrippina.

However, his interest was in natural history as opposed to the imperial variety, so unless it is something by way of nature (breech birth, double canine teeth, etc.) he seldom writes of Agrippina.

So, how can we know the woman who was Agrippina? Perhaps understanding some of the distortions in the narratives spun by these ancient chroniclers may enable us to see her more clearly.

Excluded from the political arena, women were a mere ornament for the men they represented and only praiseworthy when they were dutiful and modest.

*Agrippina the Younger. Statue in the Museo Nazionale, Naples, 1911*







*Head of Agrippina the Younger, Roman, c. AD 50*



Agrippina the Younger may have been many things but humility and obedience were not among them. In fact, many Julio-Claudian women were known for exercising considerable political influence and their reputations suffered greatly at the hands of these same historians.

Her mother, granddaughter of the Divine Caesar Augustus, was the courageous and haughty Agrippina the Elder, who devoutly believed in her divine birthright to the throne. This sense of celestial entitlement was most assuredly inherited by her eldest daughter.

Baked into Agrippina were strength, ambition and fortitude; characteristics reviled in women but long-considered positive in their male contemporaries. To describe these traits, the sources peppered their writings with pejoratives such as: *inpotentium muliebrem* (female imperiousness), *nimias spes* (excessive ambition), *potentia uxoria* (power of a wife) and *dominato regnum* (abuse of power), demonizing Agrippina to future readers for all eternity.

But with the blood of the Divine Augustus coursing through her veins, who can blame her for being imperious?

Infamous for banishing, poisoning and divorcing one another, survival within the Julio-Claudian family oftentimes meant kill or be killed. Agrippina was born at a dangerous time within an imperial dynasty at war with itself. She came into this maze of paranoia and destruction with a family-tree that reads like the who's who of Julio-Claudian emperors.

On the Julian side, she was a direct-descendent (great-granddaughter) of the Divine Caesar Augustus, a noble distinction of which only a handful could boast. The

banished Julia—the only biological child of Augustus—was her grandmother.

From the Claudian clan, she was Livia's great-granddaughter and daughter of the beloved heir-apparent and prominent general, Germanicus—who died suspiciously at the tender age of thirty-three.

It has been long speculated that his uncle and adopted father—the Emperor Tiberius (42 BCE- 37 CE)—had a hand in his demise. Next in line of succession was her

mad brother, the Emperor Caligula (12 CE-41 CE)—who according to our illustrious sources—was also her rumored lover. And she was niece, fourth and final wife to her uncle, the Emperor Claudius (10 BCE- 54 CE)—her father's brother.

Finally, she was mother—and rumored lover, yet again—to Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, better known to us as the ruthless ruler Nero (37 CE-68 CE)—whose paranoid reign of terror completely wiped out the Julio-Claudian clan.

But before things went from bad to worse between the domineering mother and her errant son, she served for a time as his co-regent—an honor never before bestowed on a woman. It would take another one hundred years for it to be entrusted to one again.

Five years after she was instrumental in making her son emperor, she died by his hands. After a number of botched attempts at matricide, Nero ultimately achieved success when his hired henchmen bludgeoned Agrippina to death.

Records of her story do not start until at the tender age of thirteen, when she is married to Gneus Domitius Ahenobarbus, her first cousin once removed and thirty-one years her senior. It was a match arranged by her



*Nero and Agrippina*





*Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicu, 1768*



Great Uncle Tiberius who had married her and her two sisters off to mediocre men of means so that their progeny could pose little or no threat to his dynastic ambitions.

As unsavory as the age difference was between the couple—to say nothing of their close relation—it was not so unusual amongst the patrician class to marry off one's children based on political alliance. Alas, there was no room for sentiment in a world dominated by political expediency.

Agrippina's family was in tatters when she married. With equal parts caution and paranoia, Tiberius had her mother and two eldest brothers banished from Rome and then later killed.

Because he was too young to pose a threat to his regime, her youngest brother, Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus—better known to us as Caligula (or Little Soldier's Boots)—lived with Tiberius. He was raised alongside Tiberius' several years younger natural grandson, Gemellus, whose unhappy fate was sealed once Caligula became emperor.

After a twenty-three-year long reign, the death of the dour Tiberius was greeted amid much fanfare. The party-like atmosphere resulted in a parade that was akin to a triumph with their new emperor, Caligula, leading the way.

But the Romans weren't celebrating Caligula's ascension as much as they were celebrating the return of their lost hero, Germanicus, in the guise of his only surviving son.

When he first came into power, Caligula tried to right all the wrongs done to his family by Tiberius. Showing no

restraint, he heaped honors both on the living and deceased members of his immediate family.

No honors were more significant than those he lavished on his three sisters. Amongst other things, Agrippina and her sisters, Julia Drusilla and Julia Livilla were not only offered the rights of the Vestal Virgins but their names were included in the state prayer and in the oath that the Consuls used to introduce motions in the Senate.

In other words, his sisters were honored as an adjunct to the emperor himself. Every oath of office read: "I will not hold myself or my children dearer than the emperor Gaius and his sisters."

Caligula also had his sisters' faces placed on coins. Coins were a powerful propaganda tool used by emperors since Augustus.

Agrippina and her sisters have the distinction of being the first living women ever to be identified on a Roman coin.

Because of their closeness, rumors began circulating about Caligula having incestuous relations with his sisters. Was it true? Given the proclivity of incest charges against the mighty in Rome, how frequent was incest there?

Although incest was both illegal and abhorred, its accusations were a common form of political invective. Because it was impossible to prove or disprove the charges, they tainted the accused—which was their *raison d'être*.

During all the hoopla over her brother's ascension to the throne, Agrippina became pregnant. Life was looking up for the eldest daughter of the revered Germanicus. Finally, her family, whose ascendancy had been supplanted by Tiberius, was sovereign and the world was



*Nero and Agrippina,  
Roman coin*

***“AGRIPPINA AND HER SISTERS HAVE  
THE DISTINCTION OF BEING THE  
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at her feet.

Then Nero, also known as Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, was born. Unsurprisingly, his beginning was an inauspicious one. In what Romans considered an evil portent, he was born breech. Intriguingly, we learn of his hazardous birth from Agrippina herself! Sadly, her memoirs are lost to us, but now and again we can hear her whispering in the records of the ancients.

As predicted, soon after Nero's birth, things began to sour for the first family. The records are sparse during this time but what we know is that Caligula fell ill sometime in 38 CE.

In fact, he was so ill that no one saw him for months and rumors abounded about who was next in line of succession. His favorite sister, Drusilla, died during this

interval and some believe he may have lost his senses as a result.

After he recovered, he began to do bizarre things for which he would become notorious. One of which was accusing his remaining two sisters of conspiring against him.

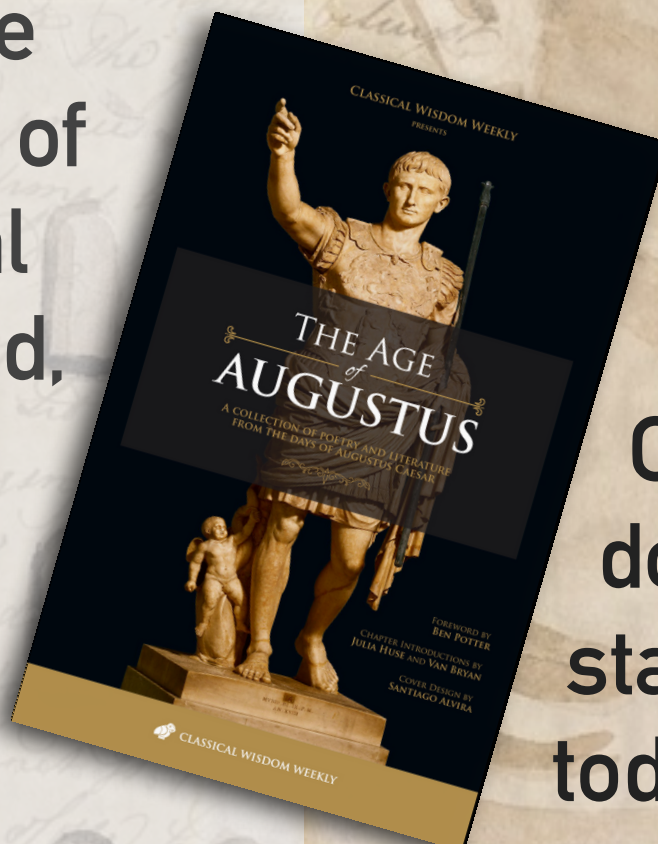
With their deviant brother threatening that he had "swords as well as islands," at his disposal, Agrippina and her sister Livilla were banished from Rome like their mother and grandmother before them.

At the age of twenty-six, Agrippina left behind her husband and four-year-old son for the wind-swept and barren island of Pontia and the distinct possibility of never seeing either of them again.

*Agrippina's story continues on page XXI*

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# Caligula's Floating Palaces

The sails were made of purple silk, the floors were covered in priceless mosaics and had a heating system resembling those present in the Roman Baths, and the decorations were made of gold, silver, and alabaster. There was even running water—hot and cold. As with most things, Caligula took his passion for boating to an extreme.

Even more impressive is the number of technological marvels on the two huge ships Caligula commissioned—mini machines and inventions to make the emperor's demands possible, and could have changed the course of history. That is, until the barges sank to the murky bottom of the Lake Nemi—by orders of the Roman Senate.

For hundreds of years the Nemi ships lay forgotten at the bottom of lake, almost completely buried in silt. It wasn't until 1932 that the ships were finally recovered, under orders from fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. It took years to recover them, but what archeologists saw when they finally got to examine the barges made their jaws drop.

They found, among other things, expertly fashioned bronze water taps which were used to control the flow of water into the ships' storage tanks and which appeared so modern

in design that archeologists actually had the taps tested to prove that they came from the same time period as the ships. The taps were so well made they still produced a water-tight seal—in fact, similar designs are still in use by modern companies today.

A seemingly insignificant find that proved to be astonishing was that of a circular platform with embedded lead ball bearings. Ball bearings were thought to have been invented by Leonardo Da Vinci during the Renaissance, but the ball bearings found at the bottom of Lake Nemi predated Da Vinci by a full fourteen-hundred years.

Most scholars believe that they were created by Caligula's engineers in order to satisfy the emperor's demand for a rotating statue of Diana—the life-sized statue would sit on the wooden platform, which would rotate slowly thanks to a mechanism below-deck and the ball bearings, producing the desired “wow effect” among Caligula's guests.

These are just a few of the technological marvels found onboard Caligula's Nemi ships—marvels that made us reexamine what we thought about history and Roman naval engineering.

*Detail of a bronze railing from one of Caligula's Lake Nemi ships*



## THE ‘CRIMES’ OF AGRIPPINA THE YOUNGER, CONTINUED:

# THE RISE OF CLAUDIUS

Within five years of sending his sisters into exile, Caligula was assassinated and was succeeded by his feeble, fifty-something-year-old Uncle Claudius. No one expected Claudius to live long, in fact no one ever expected much from him.

Agrippina returned home a widow, but within short order her Uncle Claudius found husband number two for her, in the guise of another mediocre older man of means, Gaius Crispus Passienus. Several years later, Agrippina’s second husband died, just after making her the primary heir to his substantial fortune.

Was his death natural? At the time, Romans felt sympathy for the twice widowed princess, yet historians who wrote with the benefit of hindsight—several hundred years after she died—opined that Agrippina poisoned him.

They said the timing was too perfect for him to have died naturally. Like incest, poisoning in the Roman world was difficult to prove or disprove. After all, people died from natural causes all the time.

It was after Agrippina’s second husband died that Claudius’s marriage to Messalina disintegrated. During their ten-year union, allegations of Messalina’s philandering abounded. Several decades older than his wife, Claudius—not monogamous himself—was said to have looked the other way to his wife’s many indiscretions.

But no one was prepared for what happened next. While Claudius was away on a trip, Messalina openly married her lover while declaring him emperor.

Was the marriage designed as an attempt to overthrow the reign of Claudius? To this day historians are



*A Roman Emperor AD41, by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1871. The painting shows the future Emperor Claudius, allegedly found hiding behind a curtain after the Caligula was assassinated. Caligula's wife lies murdered on the floor to the left.*

scratching their heads in bewilderment about her why she attempted this foolhardy maneuver.

Although portrayed as a doddering old man, Claudius acted swiftly against his wife and the mother of his two children by ordering his Praetorian Guard to force Messalina into suicide.

Undeniably, Claudius’ imperial ambitions were damaged





from the scandal, so who better to revive his dynastic claim to the throne than a fourth wife with purple Julian blood?

Although sources surmise that Agrippina used her seductive powers on Claudius, actually their union was beneficial to both. By marrying Agrippina, Claudius not only gained the lineage of Augustus but also of his beloved brother, Germanicus.

Hence, Agrippina's bloodline was paramount for the non-charismatic and often-infirm Claudius, whose reign had just been tainted by disgrace.

Besides she was fertile, and could potentially produce more sons for him. For Agrippina, at long last, a husband worthy of her pedigree! Except for one small thing: he was her uncle.

Claudius and his aides tried to get around that technicality by asserting the uncle-niece union was not truly incestuous because other countries condoned it.

After much back and forth with lawmakers the Senate passed a statute, making uncle-niece marriages legal—surprisingly this law remained in effect for over three hundred years in Rome.

Once they were married, the chroniclers report that Agrippina made sure to get her son—at the tender age of ten—in the line of succession by having him betrothed to Claudius' daughter, Octavia.

In fact, Claudius was as eager as Agrippina to further unite the two families.

After their marriage, Claudius officially adopted her son who shed his old name of Lucius Domitus Ahenobarbus and becomes how we know him best: Nero Claudius Drusus Germanicus Caesar.

Accounts read that Agrippina manipulated Claudius into adopting Nero, but the truth is more complicated.

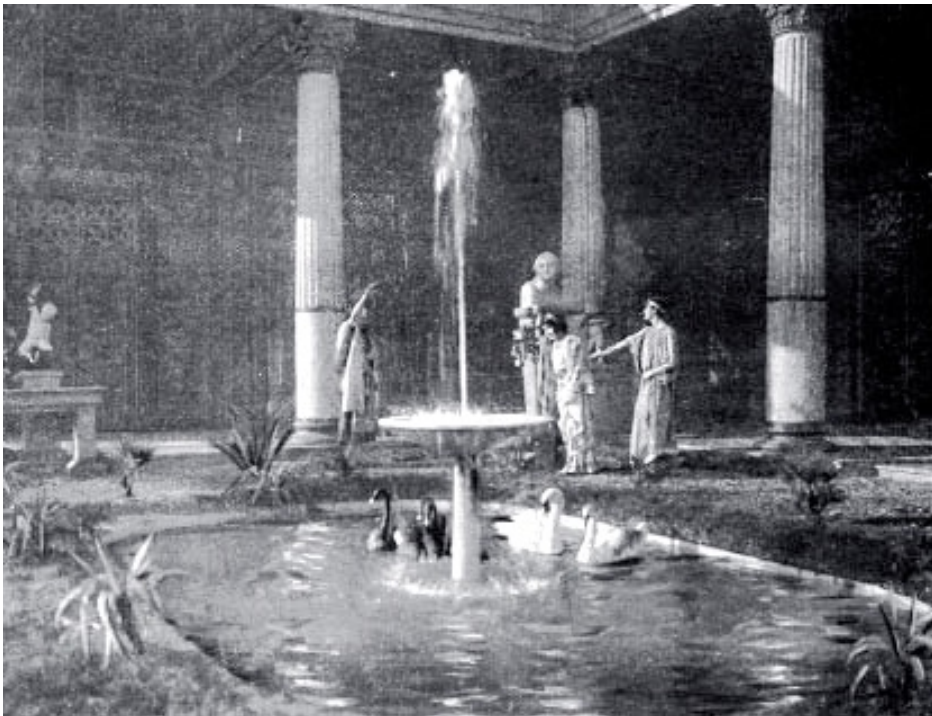
Ensuring a smooth succession for the infirm emperor was always a worry and Nero's being four years older than Claudius's biological son, Britannicus, was meaningful.

It may even have been an important factor in Claudius' choice of Agrippina as wife. If anything should happen to the ailing Claudius, Nero—ever-important that he was of both the Julian and Claudian bloodline—could





Photograms from the 1914 film *Nero and Agrippina*, directed by Mario Caserini, Turin, Italy



assume the crown earlier than his stepbrother.

At the same time that Claudius adopted Nero, he bestowed the honorific title of Augusta—which held powers akin to being named empress—on his new wife.

Although Messalina lobbied fiercely for it, Agrippina has the distinction of being the first living woman (Livia had the honor conferred upon her only in death) granted the title Augusta.

In another first for the new Augusta, Claudius honored his wife by promoting their union in this coin, called the *jugate*:



Agrippina's profile is alongside Claudius' suggesting their parity. But for every accolade and honor bestowed upon her, the sources double-down on vitriol and insinuation.

While Agrippina is portrayed as an intriguer and morally corrupt, Claudius is described as passive and easily manipulated by a wife running roughshod over him.

Evidently, Claudius sits idly by while Agrippina settles old scores by having political foes either poisoned, banished or destroyed in one way or another. Even old rivals for Claudius' hand were put to death by the fearsome Agrippina when she “vented her spleen.”

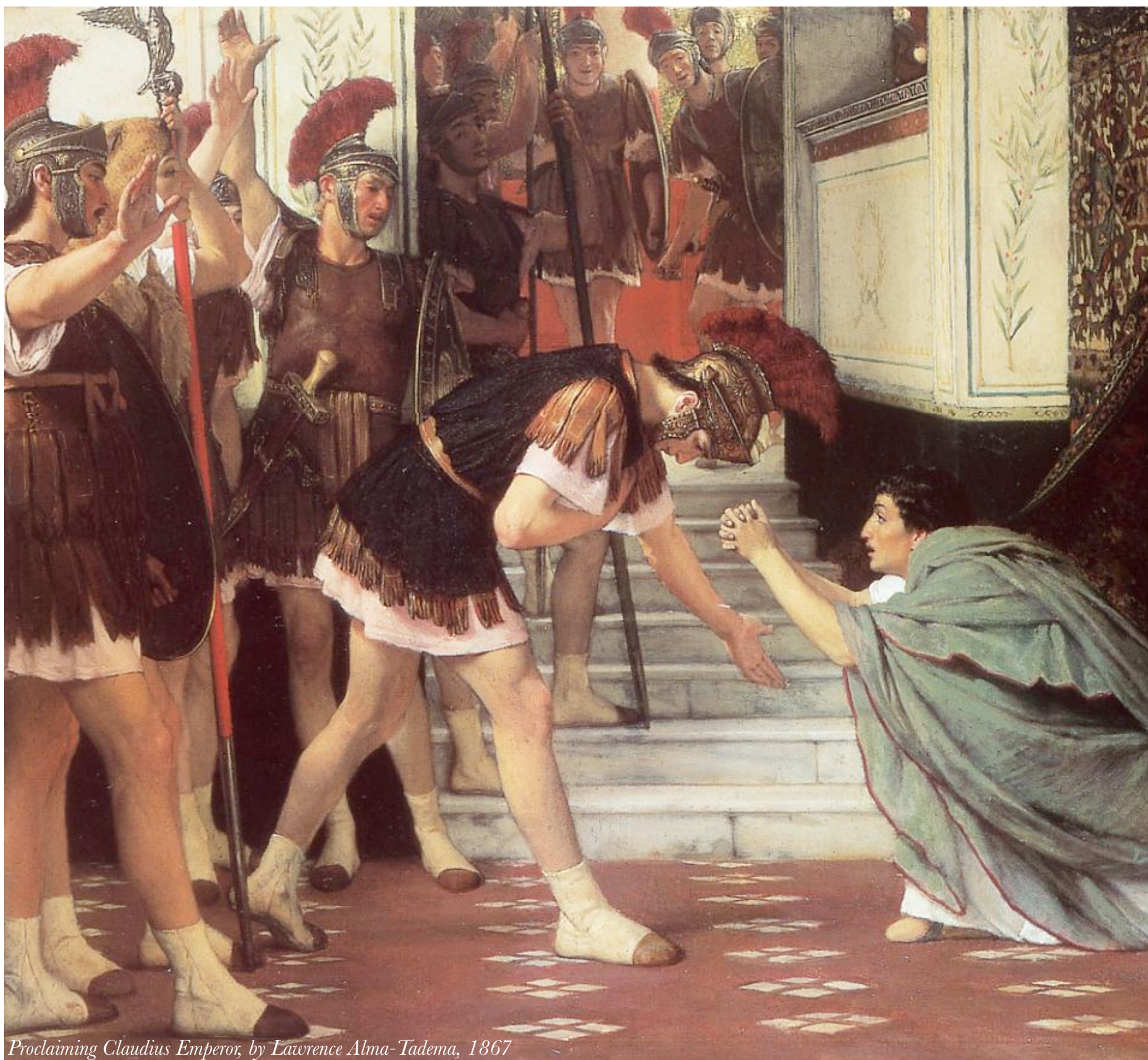
Accused of having affairs with a number of Claudius' freedmen, in addition to Seneca—the philosopher whom she had restored from exile to tutor her son—they say she used her sexuality as a means of promoting her political agenda.

There was just no end to the “depths of her moral degradation.”

Although denounced for nefarious activities in both domestic as well as foreign policy and characterized as scheming with freedmen behind the emperor's back, the truth is Agrippina was an effective partner in advocating Claudius' policies across the board.

But how can we know that Agrippina was a competent leader? One way is to compare Claudius' reign before Agrippina (41 CE- 49 CE) and his reign after Agrippina





*Proclaiming Claudius Emperor, by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1867*

(49 CE- 54 CE). Within his first eight years as emperor—in a frenzy of paranoia—Claudius executed nearly thirty-five senators and from two to three-hundred equestrians. Yet for the five years after Agrippina became empress—despite the chroniclers’ tales of her murderous campaigns—the number of executions dwindled to a mere handful.

Besides the quantity of executions, another aspect of a successful administration is stability. Just how stable was Rome? Before Agrippina, factions within the Senate had twice tried to overthrow Claudius. But after Agrippina,

Claudius had nothing but good relations with the Senate and other power-brokers such as the Praetorian Guard—whose faithful love of Germanicus easily transferred to his eldest daughter. Many historians now believe that Agrippina’s influence as a relationship builder and diplomat within the regime was considerable.

Rumored to have said: “Let him kill me, just let him rule,” the chroniclers contend that Agrippina was single-mindedly dedicated to getting Nero on the throne and is characterized as the evil stepmother who’ll stop at



nothing to promote Nero's interests ahead of those of Britannicus.

But she would not have succeeded in advancing her son if not for the age difference between the two boys.

Image was everything in ancient Rome and the four years between thirteen and nine was considerable. A lanky thirteen-year-old with a deepening voice looks more mature than a frail nine-year-old.

Truth be told, Agrippina was not the only person who had high hopes for Nero's imperial future.

Claudius himself moved up the rites of maturation for Nero so he received his *toga virilis* at thirteen instead of the usual fourteen years of age.

Enthusiastically endorsing Nero's coming into adulthood, Claudius made Nero a Consul-Designate, had him speak in front of the Senate, appointed him Prefect of the city of Rome and even allowed him to host his own games which were designed to make Nero look like a victor in a military triumph.

Both Claudius and Agrippina had witnessed bloody and erratic regime changes, thus, ensuring a smooth succession was their primary goal.

The propaganda campaign was a huge success—the people adored young Nero and looked up to him as a man.

As for Britannicus—son of the

shamed Messalina—he was only a child. So, when Claudius died in 54 CE, Nero—at age sixteen—was made the youngest-ever emperor.

But how did Claudius die? The historians tell us that toward the end of his life Claudius made no bones about regretting both his ill-fated marriages and the wrongs done to his natural son, Britannicus.

***“MANY HISTORIANS NOW BELIEVE THAT AGRIPPINA’S INFLUENCE AS A RELATIONSHIP BUILDER AND DIPLOMAT WITHIN THE REGIME WAS CONSIDERABLE.”***

Fearing both a divorce and appointing a maturing Britannicus as his successor, they say Agrippina made

sure Claudius' time on the planet was shortened by enlisting the help of Locusta, a notorious poisoner who crops up time and again in the Julio-Claudian psycho-dramas.

Because they were his favorite food, the poison was applied on “particularly succulent mushrooms” and was designed to be slow-acting so Claudius took ill to his bed.

Frantically, Agrippina hired another accomplice to dispatch the emperor—this time a reputable doctor by the name of Gaius Stertinius Xenophon.

Tacitus opines: “Xenophon, it is thought, put down his throat a feather smeared with fast-acting poison.” By whom, “is it thought?”

The truth is Claudius—ever-ill—was often taking to his bed. It seems likely that a doctor would administer to him in his illness. Even Tacitus himself seems uncertain about the doctor's use of a poisoned feather in the emperor's death



with his feeble “it is thought” phrase.

Impossible to prove but effective in tarnishing a reputation, Agrippina has long stood accused of poisoning Claudius on the flimsiest of notions.

But questions remain. After an emperor’s death, his will is read to the public. Yet, Claudius’ will was never

assembled outside the palace waiting to hear about the health of Claudius, the Praetorian Guard was put in place to welcome and protect their new emperor.

Finally, the palace gates opened and out stepped the fresh-faced sixteen-year-old Nero. By his side was Sextus Afranius Burrus, the Praetorian Prefect, former tutor and now advisor to the new emperor.



*Locusta Testing Poison on a Slave, by Joseph-Noël Sylvestre, 19th century*

released. Unless she had something to hide, why wouldn’t Agrippina release the will? If the will named Britannicus heir, it would set up another claim to the throne—which is the last thing she would want.

There was some delay in announcing Claudius’ death. Ever the organizer, Agrippina had to set the stage and prepare Nero for his all-important role of a lifetime. As throngs of people

At Burrus’ nod, the Praetorians hailed Nero “Imperator!”

Soon after, the Senate proclaimed Nero emperor and awarded him the necessary powers. No one protested—it was the seamless succession for which she had planned.

Within a few short hours, Agrippina went from being the wife of an emperor to the mother of one.

*Agrippina’s story continues on page XXVIII*



# Seneca, Tutor to Nero

Seneca the younger, author of *On the Shortness of Life*, is not one of those philosophers to tackle insubstantial questions.

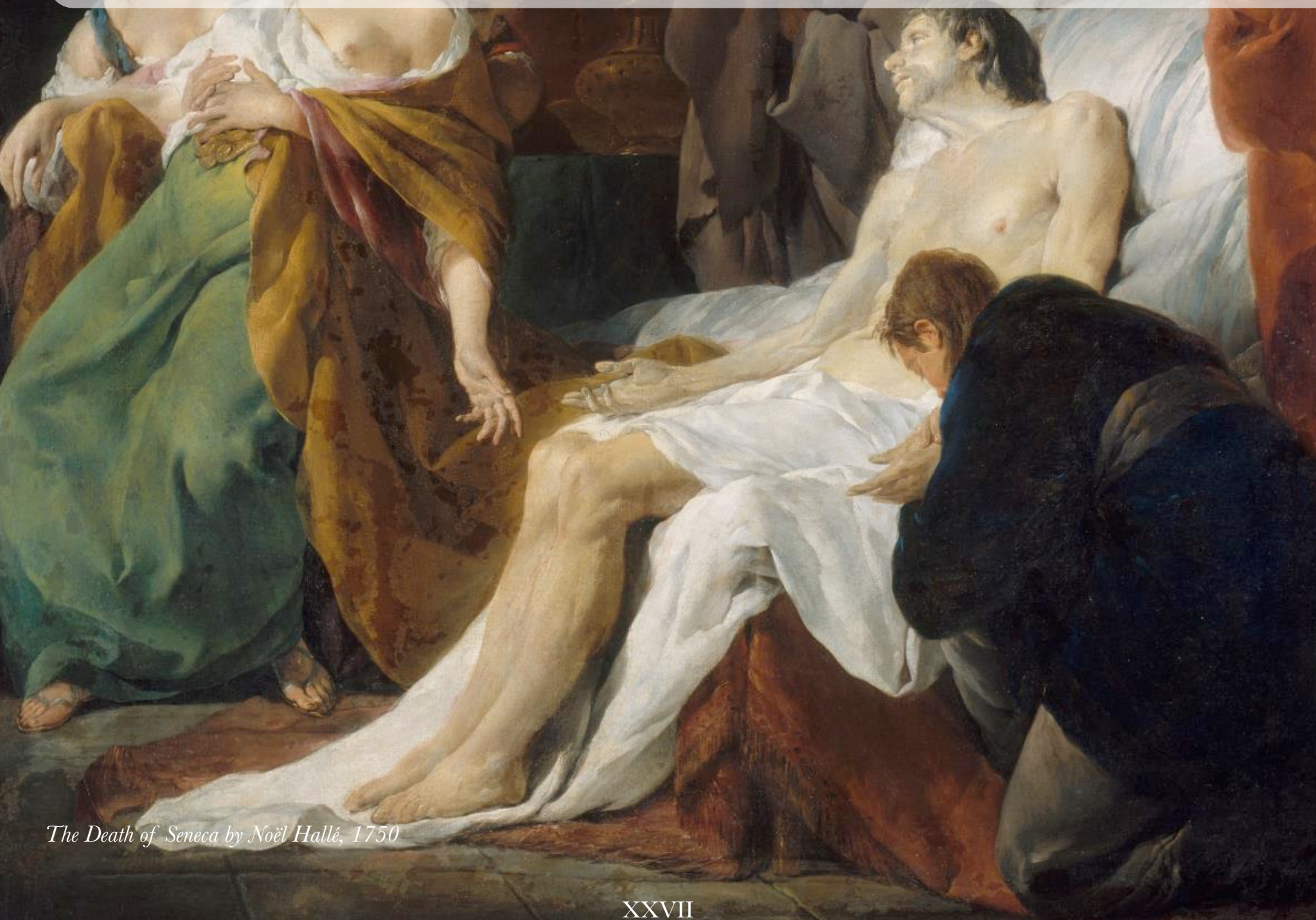
As a stoic, he was committed to nothing short of a societal revolution that would see people abandon their superficial ways and embrace the tenets of stoicism not merely as food for thought, but as a viable way of life.

The problem with societal revolutions is that they can be kind of hard. It is likely then that the stoics, who were nothing if not flexible, decided that the best way to endow stoicism upon the Roman population would be to

supplant the philosophy within the minds of Rome's most notable figures.

It is possible that it was this thought that prompted Seneca to take a position as the tutor, and later an advisor, to a young Emperor Nero. Seneca wrote extensively to the young emperor, attempting to spur him in the direction of philosophy and away from political demagoguery.

Now I'm not going to spoil the ending for you, but let's just all agree that it didn't really work out. Nero has been called a lot of things, but a "thoughtful, philosophical leader" was never one of them.



*The Death of Seneca* by Noël Hallé, 1750



## THE ‘CRIMES’ OF AGRIPPINA THE YOUNGER, CONTINUED:

# THE ‘RULE’ OF NERO

For all intents and purposes, she was in charge. After Nero was made emperor, Agrippina made sure he visited both the Senate and the Praetorian Guard where his first imperial password was *optimam matrum* or best mother.

Then she orchestrated a funeral for Claudius that was on-par with that of Augustus. Her goal was to have Claudius deified and his elaborate five-day long funeral helped facilitate this. Deifying Claudius also elevated her status considerably.

She was now wife of a god and was made chief priestess in his cult where she had—at long last—an official public role. She was given two lictors or bodyguards—Livia only had one—and a German guard.

When mother and son appeared in public together—which was often—he would walk beside the litter in which she was carried, making it look for all the world to see that it was she, not he, who was regent.

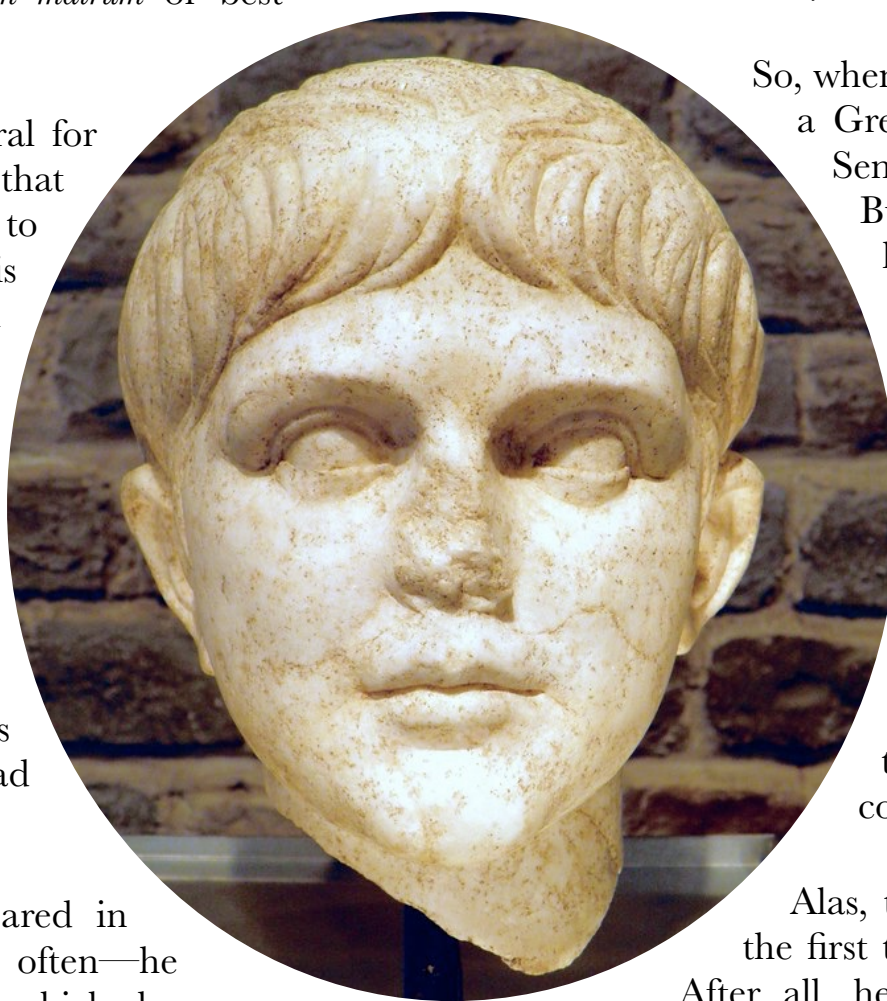
Because she wanted to get her hands into all facets of governance she invited the Senate to convene in the palace so that she could eavesdrop on their debates from behind a curtain. No longer did she have to rely on the second-hand accounts from men.

In another first for coin design, the first coins issued were of mother and son facing each other demonstrating complete parity between the pair.

About Young Nero, Tacitus laments: “What hope is there in a child led by a woman?”

Truth be told, Nero could give a fig about governing—which sadly never changed much in his lifetime. He was a musician, an actor, and a poet. Unlike his mother, he had no interest in the intricacies of politics. So initially he let her run the show, and everything was fine—until he fell in love.

By this time, Nero had been unhappily married to Octavia for at least a few years. Although politically well-matched they were ill-suited in every other way. It was no secret that they loathed each other.



So, when his heart was captured by Acte—a Greek ex-slave on the palace staff—Seneca, now co-advisor (along with Burrus) to Nero, helped him in hiding the relationship from his mother.

All-knowing and all-seeing, it was not long before Agrippina found out about the affair and predictably went into a fury. “A handmaid for a daughter-in-law!” she cried, and demanded Nero return to his matrimonial bed where—it was to be hoped—they would produce a much-coveted Julio-Claudian heir.

Alas, that was never to be. For perhaps the first time ever, Nero defied his mother. After all, he was the emperor and was not about to kowtow, yet again, to the will of his domineering mother.

Not only did he overtly continue his affair with Acte, but he began to grow closer to his advisors who were, by this time, often at loggerheads with Agrippina.

So, began a clash of wills between his advisors and his mother with the teenage Nero calling the shots—to the imagined exasperation of Agrippina.

If she were angry about the affair with Acte, however, she must have been *enraged* by what followed.





*The work of some sculptors at Nero's colossus, by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1877*



Being emperor, the teenaged Nero took it upon himself (with the ever-sage advice of Seneca) to dismiss from court one of Agrippina's most stalwart confidants. Pallas was her right-hand man and a financial advisor whom she relied on through Claudius' reign.

In fact, Pallas' name comes up time and again as much more than just an advisor for Agrippina. Nevertheless, now that Nero was in charge he wanted to clean house and surround himself with people of his choosing. After discovering Pallas' dismissal, an infuriated Agrippina cried: "I gave you the empire!"—implying she could take it away—and threatened to support the soon-to-be mature Britannicus over her son.

Poor Britannicus! To be caught in a tug of war between Agrippina and Nero—a worse fate cannot be imagined. But nothing prepared her for what happened next. Over dinner one night, Britannicus fell ill and died—right there at the table.

Agrippina went white with fear. Although never bosom-buddies, Britannicus grew up with her son. Could Nero poison his step-brother with such disregard? She was not yet familiar with what would become Nero's hallmark cruelty. Later, Nero would report that Britannicus suffered from epilepsy and had died from a seizure. Some historians today believe that it was epilepsy, not poisoning, that killed Britannicus.

But once again the timing is vexing. Britannicus was just about to receive his *toga virilis*—the ceremony that would usher in his manhood—and Agrippina was making overtures in his direction.

Finally, he was coming into his own. The famed Locusta's name gets bandied about regarding his death. Characteristic of something to hide, Nero had Britannicus' body cremated *posthaste* and predictably, his funeral was without pomp or ceremony.

Yet Nero was not done with exerting his authority. In another move against his mother, Agrippina was banished—once again—this time from the palace. She was moved to a family estate and her *lictors*, German guard, and all the trappings associated with regency were taken away. For a woman who had not only spent most of her adult life in the public eye but had ruled the empire amidst great fanfare, Agrippina had become reduced to the secluded life of a private citizen.



*Messalina holding Britannicus, marble, ca. 45 AD*



Yet, despite the banishment, things appear to have stabilized between mother and son, until another love interest entered the scene.

Eight years older than Nero, Poppaea Sabina was a married woman when she first took up with the young Nero. Naturally, Agrippina opposed the union; she still nourished unrealized hopes for a reconciliation between Nero and Octavia.

The sources contend that Agrippina became so desperate for Nero to give up Poppaea that she tried seducing him herself! And according to the ancients, she succeeded in her efforts. There are many stories—some quite graphic—about the pair being caught in *fragrante delicto*. As with most everything from the sources, it is wise to have a healthy dose of skepticism.

Soon after, Nero becomes resolved to kill his mother. What prompted the decision? It remains a mystery though Poppaea—another strong-willed hence evil woman—is blamed for putting the odious idea into Nero's head.

But it may be more complicated than that.

Even in her relative isolation, Agrippina was supported by the fiercely loyal Praetorian Guard and could raise an armed insurrection against her son, if she chose. The truth is Nero was frightened of her, which is why his attempts at killing her sound like a dark comedy.

Because he could not enlist the help of the Praetorian Guard, Nero had to make her death look accidental. The first attempt at this was the specialty of the Julio-Claudian clan: poison. But that failed. Agrippina was well-stocked with enough antidotes to last until the first millennium.

Next was an ill-conceived plan of having a ceiling fall on her while she was sleeping. This came to naught when her workers saw the flaw in design and promptly fixed it. Lastly, one of Nero's men devised a collapsible boat which would “accidentally” break down upon transporting her.

Alas, the boat did break down but only killed her hired hands, whereas Agrippina swam to safety. Like Rasputin, Agrippina survived multiple assassination attempts!



*The Shipwreck of Agrippina, Gustav Wertheimer, 1847–1902*







By this time, Nero was in a frenzy. Because of the collapsible boat, his mother now knew he was trying to kill her, so he was afraid of her more than ever.

Being a coward, Nero turned the tables on her and reported that it was she who was trying to kill him. Soon after, he hired henchmen to go to her house and finish the evil deed.

When she realized the men were there to kill her, she is rumored to have shouted “Strike here!” pointing to her womb, which bore the monster her son had become.

Nero wrote to the Senate that his mother had hired a freedman to try to kill him but when that failed she killed herself. No one truly believed him but the Praetorian Guard let him live.

She was cremated the day she died and was accorded no public funeral. In their obsequy, the servile Senate thanked the gods for keeping their matricidal emperor safe.

While they were groveling thusly, there was a partial eclipse of the sun which was always an ill-portent.

In fact, his mother’s death marked the turning point in Nero’s reign. When she was alive, either running the

government or advising him, Rome was a strong, stable and prosperous state.

But after her passing, ruled by fear and paranoia, Nero’s reign became increasingly erratic and Rome declined into chaos.

After fourteen years and much bloodshed, Nero was declared enemy of the state and ignominiously fled Rome in disguise. Too cowardly to kill himself, he hired a freedman to do the job.

They called her vile when she was strong. They called her defiant when she was tenacious. She was a leader but they called her a schemer. She was a diplomat but they called her a whore.

The truth is something we will never really know about Agrippina. What we do know is that the men who wrote about her could not be unbiased toward strong women; a fact which challenges every accusation against her.

One thing is certain, in a world where women were irrelevant, Agrippina was in charge and the empire ran more smoothly on account of it.

If there were gender equality in ancient Rome, not only would she have been deified but there would have been a month named in her honor. 🐉

*Nero Ordering the Murder of his Mother, by Noël Coypel I, 17th century*

