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AGRIPPINA: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

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By way of contemplating reception, we might begin by looking at the silent screen film, **Enrico Guazzoni's *Agrippina* (1911)**, starring Adele Bianchi Azzarili as Agrippina, directed by Enrico Guazzoni, and distributed by Società Italiana Cines. It is available on YouTube (uploaded by Tony Fuchs) at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cbi8TP8zFK8>

The site appears to advertise optional English sub-titles, but I have been unable to find them. For your convenience, I offer my translations of the **Dutch Subtitles** (which seem to me to be flawed in places) in an Appendix.

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY (in Alphabetical Order)

- Anthony Barrett, *Agrippina. Mother of Nero* (London, Batsford, 1996, reprinted by Yale University Press as *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire* [1998])
- Judith Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina. Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006)
- Edwin Judge, 'Agrippina as Ruler of Rome?', *Papers of the Macquarie University Continuing Education Conference for Ancient History Teachers* (Sydney 1987), 123–30 [= *Teaching History* 22.1 (March, 1988), 13–16]
- Peter Keegan, "'She is a Mass of Riddles': Julia Augusta Agrippina and the Sources", in *Ancient History: Resources for Teachers* (Macquarie University) 2007 [2010], 158–176 (**an offprint of this article is on sale at the Teachers Conference for \$1**)
- Peter Keegan, 'Agrippina to Veturia: Ancient and modern companions to *Female Biography*', in Gina Luria Walker (ed.), *The Invention of Female Biography* (London, and New York, Routledge, 2018), 145–173
- Bill Leadbetter, 'The Ambition of Agrippina the Younger' *Ancient History: Resources for Teachers* (Macquarie University) 25.1 (1995), 39–55 (**offprint on sale at the Teachers Conference for \$1**)
- Mette Moltesen and Ann Marie Nielsen (eds), *Agrippina Minor. Life and Afterlife* (Copenhagen, NY Carlsberg Glyptotek, 2007)
- Susan Wood, *Imperial Women. A Study in Public Images 40 BC – AD 68* (Leiden, Brill, 1988), 249–314.

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY on **TACITUS** (in Chronological Order)

- B. Walker, *The Annals of Tacitus. A Study in the Writing of History* (Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1952, revised 1960)
- Ronald Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1958)
- Donald R. Dudley, *The Word of Tacitus* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1968)
- Ronald Syme, *Ten Studies in Tacitus* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970)
- F.R.D. Goodyear, *Tacitus* (Greece & Rome New Surveys 4, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970)
- Ronald Mellor, *Tacitus* (New York and London, Routledge, 1993)
- A.(Tony) J. Woodman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010)

Recent translations:

- A.J. Woodman, *Tacitus. The Annals* (Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett, 2004)
- J.C. Yardley (trans.) *Tacitus. The Annals. The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius and Nero* (Oxford World's Classics, 2008)

27/4/99

(NOT ALL MARRIAGES OR CHILDREN SHOWN.
Dotted lines for adoptions. Common names underlined. Some dates approximate)

VERY SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY on **HERMENEUTICS** (in order of original composition)
(which will be summarized in a very simplified manner in the presentation)

Friedrich **Schleiermacher**, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts* (1805, 1809–10) + the *Compendium* of 1819 and the *Marginal Notes* of 1828. Translated by James Duke and Jack Forstman (Missoula, Montana, Scholars Press, 1977)

(Philipp) August **Böckh** (1785–1867)

Encyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften. Lectures 1809–1865 (1877; 2nd ed. Klussmann, 1886)

Wilhelm **Dilthey**, *Selected Works* Volume IV: *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, edited by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010)

Hans-Georg **Gadamer**, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) = *Truth and Method* (New York, The Seabury Press, 1975 / 2nd edition, London, Sheed and Ward, 1989 / trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall [New York/London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013])

Jens Zimmermann, *Hermeneutics. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015)

A Simplified Checklist for Tacitus

What do we know about the author? When was Tacitus writing? What were his life experiences? What were his idiosyncrasies? Why was he writing? To whom was he writing? What did he expect his audience to know? (What did he expect his audience to share with him?) What was the genre? What were the expectations of the genre? **Was he a primary source?** Did he have access to primary evidence?

PRIMARY & SECONDARY SOURCES

Arnaldo Momigliano, 'Ancient History and the Antiquarian' [1950], in *Studies in Historiography* (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 1–39, at p. 2:

"The whole modern method of historical research is founded upon the distinction between original and derivative authorities. By original authorities we mean either statements by eye-witnesses, or documents, and other material remains, which are contemporary with the events which they attest. By derivative authorities we mean historians or chroniclers who relate and discuss events which they have not witnessed but which they have heard of or inferred directly or indirectly from original authorities. We praise the original authorities or sources – for being reliable, but we praise non-contemporary historians — or derivative authorities – for displaying sound judgment in the interpretation and evaluation of the original sources. This distinction ... became the patrimony of historical research only in the late seventeenth century."

M.I. Finley, *Ancient History. Evidence and Models* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1985), Chapter 2 'The Ancient Historian and his Sources':

"The modern historian of antiquity ... cannot write a history of Rome by reworking in modern language the Latin of Livy as Livy had paraphrased or translated the Greek of Polybius." (8)

"It is ... a strange aberration when a reputable Roman historian, writing the volume on the early Romans and Etruscans (down to 390 BC), in a series edited by an equally reputable colleague, prints an appendix headed 'primary sources' which consists of thumbnail sketches in four to ten lines each of a dozen authors, ranging in time from Timaeus, whose long career spanned the end of the fourth century BC and the first half of the third, to Festus, who flourished about AD 150. I cannot imagine that, even as a slip, a Renaissance historian would compile a list of primary sources made up of John Addington Symonds, Burckhardt and Chabod. I suspect that Ogilvie's slip reflects, no doubt subconsciously, the widespread sentiment that anything written in Greek or Latin is somehow privileged, exempt from the normal canons of evaluation." (10)

THE MORAL PURPOSE OF HISTORY

Tacitus, *From the Death of the Divine Augustus* (the *Annales*) 3.65.1 (trans. D.R. Dudley)

“As I see it, the chief duty of the historian is this: to see that virtue is placed on record, and that evil men and evil deeds have cause to fear judgement at the bar of posterity.”

Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1939), 4

“The conviction that it all had to happen is indeed difficult to discard. Yet that conviction ruins the living interest of history and precludes a fair judgement upon the agents.”

DOES THE AUTHOR GET BETWEEN US AND THE PAST?

Amy Richlin, ‘Julia’s Jokes, Galla Placidia, and the Roman Use of Women as Political Icons’, in Barbara Garlick, Suzanne Dixon and Pauline Allen *et al.* (eds), *Stereotypes of Women in Political Power* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1992), 65–91:

“When we look at texts and objects to discover reality, it is as if we looked at a scene through a screen on a window; as we become interested in the screen and its properties, we suddenly notice that the scene is in fact painted on the screen itself. What lies beyond is unknown.” (85)

AGRIPPINA’S MEMOIRS

R.G. Lewis, ‘Imperial Autobiography, Augustus to Hadrian’, in Wolfgang Haase (ed.) *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt (ANRW)* 34.1 (Berlin, 1993), 629–706, at 652–8 “Agrippina the Younger — ‘*De consiliis suis*’?”

Barbara Levick, ‘Agrippina’ in T.J. Cornell (ed.) *The Fragments of the Roman Historians* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), Vol. 1, 515–17. A translation is provided in Vol. 2, 996–99; and a commentary in Vol. 3, 602.

Tac. *Ann.* 4.53 (Loeb translation, modified):

“... Agrippina [the Younger], obstinately nursing her anger, and attacked by physical illness, was visited by Caesar [sc. Tiberius]. For long her tears fell in silence; then she began with reproaches and entreaties: ‘He must aid her loneliness and give her a husband; she had still the requisite youth, and the virtuous had no consolation but in marriage—the state had citizens who would stoop to receive the wife of Germanicus and his children.’ Caesar, however, though he saw all that was implied in the request, was reluctant to betray either fear or resentment, and therefore, in spite of her insistence, left her without an answer. This incident, not noticed by the professed historians, I found in the memoirs (*commentarii*) of her daughter Agrippina (mother of the *princeps* Nero), who recorded for posterity her life and the vicissitudes of her house (*quae ... vitam suam et casus suorum posteris memoravit*).”

Pliny, *Natural History* 7.45–6:

It is contrary to nature to be born feet first ... Nero also, who was emperor recently and was throughout his whole *principatus* an enemy of the human race, was, as his mother Agrippina writes, born feet first.

Are highly personal incidents recorded by Tacitus derived from the memoirs? See, e.g., *Ann.* 4.3?

Tac. *Ann.* 4.3 (Loeb trans., modified)

Still, the imperial house with its plentitude of Caesars—a son arrived at manhood, grandchildren at the years of discretion—gave [Sejanus’] ambition pause: for to attack all at once by violence was hazardous, while treachery demanded an interval between crime and crime. He resolved, however, to take the more secret way, and to begin with Drusus, against whom he felt the stimulus of a recent anger; for Drusus, impatient of a rival, and quick-tempered to a fault, had in a casual altercation raised his hand against Sejanus, and, upon a counter-demonstration, had struck him in the face. On exploring the possibilities, then, it appeared simplest to turn to the Drusus’ wife Livia, sister of Germanicus, in earlier days ill-favoured girl, but then stunningly beautiful. In the part of an impassioned lover, he seduced her to adultery: then, when the first infamy (*flagitium*) had been achieved—and a woman, who has parted with her virtue, will not refuse other demands—he moved her to dream of marriage, a partnership in the empire, and the murder of her husband.

Are the speeches given to Agrippina from the memoirs? See the *oratio recta* at *Ann.* 13. 20–21. Lewis thinks so (657). “It yields one or two items of unusual and perhaps idiosyncratic vocabulary”—*labefactare* (nowhere else in Tacitus) — *preparare* (in Tacitus only otherwise at *Ann.* 11.7) — *conscientia subeunda*: “not perhaps entirely orthodox [Lewis]” — and *benevolentia certare*, “while entirely orthodox, also looks idiosyncratic[Lewis]”. On the peculiarities of her mother’s diction, see Suetonius *Divus Augustus* 86.

Tac. Ann. 13.21 (Loeb trans. modified)

When the emperor's fears had been thus calmed, at break of day a visit was paid to Agrippina; who was to listen to the charges, and rebut them or pay the penalty. The commission was carried out by Burrus under the eye of Seneca: a number of freedmen also were present as witnesses to the conversation. Then, after recapitulating the charges and their authors, Burrus adopted a threatening attitude. Agrippina summoned up her pride:—"I am not astonished," she said, "that Silana, who has never known maternity, should have no knowledge of a mother's heart: for parents do not change their children as a wanton changes her adulterers. Nor, if Iturius and Calvisius, after consuming the last morsel of their estates, pay their aged mistress the last abject service of undertaking an accusation, is that a reason why my own good repute should be darkened by the blood of my son or Caesar's conscience by that of his mother (*ideo aut mihi infamia parricidii aut Caesari conscientia subeunda est*)? For as to Domitia—I should thank her for her enmity, if she were competing with me in benevolence to my Nero (*si benevolentia mecum in Neronem meum certaret*), instead of staging this comedy with the help of her bedfellow Atimetus and her actor Paris. In the days when my counsels were preparing his adoption, his proconsular power, his consulate in prospect, and the other steps to his imperium (*et cetera apiscendo imperio praepararentur*), she was embellishing the fish-ponds of her beloved Baiae.—Or let a man stand forth who will argue that I tampered with the cohorts (the Guard) in the city—who will argue that I shook the allegiance of the provinces (*qui provinciarum fidem labefactam ... arguat*)—or, finally, of seducing either slave or freedman into crime! Could I have lived with Britannicus on the throne? And if Plautus or another shall acquire the empire and sit in judgement, am I to assume there is a dearth of accusers prepared to indict me, no longer for the occasional hasty utterances of an ill-regulated love, but for guilt from which only a son can absolve?" The listeners were moved, and ventured an attempt to calm her transports, but she demanded an interview with her son. There she neither spoke in support of her innocence, as though she could entertain misgivings, nor on the theme of her services, as though she would cast them in his teeth, but procured vengeance upon her accusers and recognition for her friends.

Other 'contemporary' sources dealing with the private lives of the Neronian 'court' (and used by Tacitus) were Cluvius Rufus and Fabius Rusticus, on whom (and for a full bibliography), see Barbara Levick, in T.J. Cornell (ed.) *The Fragments of the Roman Historians* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), Vol. 1, 548–60 and 568–72, respectively.

Back to hermeneutics ...

PESSIMISTS versus OPTIMISTS

For the concept: Amy Richlin, 'The Ethnographer's Dilemma and the Dream of a Lost Golden Age', in Nancy Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin (eds), *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (London and New York, Routledge 1993), 272–303.

For an Optimist Interpretation: Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (London and Sydney, Croom Helm 1988). Note: Dixon managed to execute a 180° turn during her later career; see, for example, her *Reading Roman Women. Sources, Genres and Real Life* (London, Duckworth, 2001). She can now be cited as a *exemplum* of the Pessimist School; Jo-Ann Shelton, *The Women of Pliny's Letters* (London & New York, Routledge, 2013),

For a Pessimist Interpretation: Judith Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina. Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006).

See also Tom Hillard, 'Republican Politics, Women and the Evidence', *Helios* 16 (1989), 165–182; 'On the Stage, Behind the Curtain: Images of Politically Active Women in the Late Roman Republic', in B. Garlick *et al.* (eds), *op.cit.* (above), 37–64 (arguing that most of the 'evidence' is hostile; coming from political polemic; in the form of allegation; alleging clandestine activity; aimed at male opponents [who are shown to be emasculated]; and, as a by-product, was likely to discourage female political activity).

POSSIBLE CASE STUDIES

Tacitus *Annales* 12.7.5–7 (Loeb trans., modified) — on the legitimization of uncle-niece marriages (AD 49):

From this moment it was a changed state, and all things moved at the command of a woman—but not a woman who, as Messalina, treated in wantonness the Roman empire as a toy. It was a tightly drawn (*adductum*), almost masculine enslavement (*quasi virile servitium*): in public, there was austerity and not infrequently arrogance (*saepius superbia*); at home, no trace of unchastity, unless it might contribute to power/control (*dominatio*).

Tacitus *Annales* 12.37.5 (AD 51) (Loeb trans., modified)

The answer (to the British king Caratacus's plea for clemency) was the Caesar's (sc. Claudius') pardon for the prince, his wife, and his brothers; and the prisoners, freed from their chains, paid their homage to Agrippina also—a conspicuous figure on another tribunal not far away (*haud procul alio suggestu conspicuam*)—in the same terms of praise and gratitude which they had employed to the *Princeps*. It was an innovation, certainly, and one without precedent in ancient custom (*novum sane et moribus veterum insolitum*), that a woman should sit in state before Roman standards (*feminam signis Romanis praesidere*): it was the advertisement of her claim to a partnership in the empire (*imperii sociam*) which her ancestors had created.

Tacitus *Annales* 13.5 (Loeb trans., significantly modified) — discussing the wave of legislation by a reinvigorated Senate in Nero's early years, amongst which was the resolution that quaestors-designate were to be under no obligation to produce a gladiatorial spectacle (AD 54):

The latter point, though opposed by Agrippina as a subversion of the acts of Claudius, was carried by the Fathers, whose meetings were specially convened in *Palatium*, so that she could station herself at a newly-added door in their rear, shut off by a curtain thick enough to conceal her from view but not to debar her from hearing. In fact, when an Armenian deputation was pleading the national cause before Nero, she was preparing to ascend the dais of the Commander (*suggestum imperatoris*) and to share his presidency (*praesidere simul parabat*), had not Seneca, while others stood aghast, admonished [Nero] to go and meet his approaching mother: thus, an assumption of filial piety averted a scandal (*ita specie pietatis obviam itum dedecori*).

The episode was obviously famous, and is also covered (in slightly different form) by Cassius Dio (Xiphilinus' *Epitome of Dio* 61.3.4).

The Melancholy Finale: *ventrem feri*! **LIFE IMITATES ART? ART PROMPTS LIFE? HISTORIOGRAPHY IMITATES ART?**

I thank Campbell Calverley (University of Otago) for sharing unpublished material with me. See below. I have here adopted some of the pertinent passages he provides.

Tac.*Ann.* 14.8 (trans. Woodman):

But the assailants surrounded her bed, and initially the trierarch struck her head with his cudgel; and, as the centurion was already drawing his sword for death, she proffered her womb, crying out "Stab my belly!" (*ventrem feri*); and with many wounds she was dispatched.

Seneca the Younger, *Oedipus*, 1025-31, 1036-9; trans. Fitch

Jocasta (to herself): Every decency of human law
Has been confounded and destroyed by your incest.
Die. Drive out your accursed life with the sword.
Even if he who spurs the heavens, the sire of the gods,
Should hurl his glittering bolts without mercy,
I could never pay a penalty to match my crimes as an
Unspeakable mother.

...

Shall I fasten the weapon
In my breast, or drive it deep into my bare throat?
You have no skill in choosing a wound! Strike this, my hand,
This capacious womb, which bore husband and children. (*Hunc, dextra, hunc pete / Uterum
capacem, qui virum et natos tulit.*)

Pseudo-Seneca, *Octavia*, 358-76 (trans. Boyle)

A henchman performs the orders,
Opens her princely breast with steel.
The dying misfortunate asks
Her executioner
To sink the vile sword in her womb,
Saying: "Stab here with your steel, here –
Where this monstrosity was born." (*"His est, his est fodiendus" ait / "ferro, monstrum qui tale
tulit."*)
After these words commingle
With her final groan,
She yields a despondent soul
Through savage wounds.

J. Hind, 'The Death of Agrippina and the Finale of the "Oedipus" of Seneca', *A.U.M.L.A.: Journal of the Australasian Universities Modern Language Association*, 38 (1972), 204–211

A.J. Boyle, *Tragic Seneca: an essay in the theatrical tradition* (London, Routledge, 1997), 102.

F. L'Hoir, *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales*. Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2006), 90-91.

Campbell Calverley, 'A Sin Against God: The Rhetoric of Incest in Senecan Tragedy and Tacitean History' (forthcoming — presented the the Australasian Society for Classical Studies 39th Annual Conference, University of Queensland, 2018).

APPENDIX:
The Subtitles to Enrico Guazzoni's *Agrippina* (1911)

For your convenience, I offer my translations of the **Dutch Subtitles** (which seem to me to be flawed in places). In translating, I have tried to amend them.

Keizerin Agrippina
The Empress Agrippina

Locusta de gifmengster
Locusta the poison-mixer

Na den dood van CLAUDIUS doet AGRIPPINA NERO tot Keizer verheffen tot ergeis van BRITANNICUS de ware troonopvolger
After the death of Claudius, Agrippina makes Nero emperor to the chagrin of Britannicus, the true heir to the throne

Daar de toenmalige regeering LOCUSTA niet durfde tegenspreken, erkent zij, NERO als Keizer [surely, in the subtitles provided. 'Locusta' is a slip for 'Agrippina']
Since the former administration did not dare to contradict Agrippina, they acknowledge Nero as Emperor

AGRIPPINA wil POPPEA de liefde doen verwerven van Nero
Agrippina wants Poppaea to acquire the love of Nero
[the performance in the following clip seems to head in the opposite direction]

AGRIPPINA dreigt NERO, BRITANNICUS op den troon te doen brengen, en als gevolg daarvan, verwaarloost hij zijn vrouw OCTAVIA geheel.
Agrippina threatens Nero with bringing Britannicus to the throne, and as a consequence, he completely rejects his wife Octavia.

NERO, beproeft de uitwerking van een vergiftd door AGRIPPINA samen gesteld; op een zijner verdrukte slaven.
[Again, the subtitler seems to have confused Locusta with Agrippina]
Nero tests the effect of a poison compiled by Locusta on one of his oppressed slaves.

De bedreigingen van AGRIPPINA hebben hunne uitwerking gemist. BRITANNICUS is vergiftigd.
The threats from Agrippina have missed their mark. Britannicus has been poisoned.

NERO's lust is nog niet bevredigd ... en vertrouwd ANICETUS een verschrikkelijke opdracht toe.
Nero's lust is not yet satisfied ... and Anicetus is entrusted with a terrible assignment.

AGRIPPINA welke argwaan krijgt verlaat het Keizerlijk paleis.
Agrippina harbouring suspicions leaves the Imperial Palace.

De list van ANICETUS
Anicetus' contrivance

.... doch de onverzoenlijke haat van Keizer NERO, beslist het lot van AGRIPPINA. Zij stierf onder de dolk van Anicetus
.... but the irreconcilable hatred of Emperor Nero decides the fate of Agrippina. She dies by the dagger of Anicetus.