

THE DEATH OF CLAUDIUS

Nothing excites the imagination quite as much as a good murder mystery and the death of Claudius fits the bill nicely.¹ Claudius died suddenly under fairly mysterious circumstances and his death ushered in the despised principate of Nero, a stepson who was favoured over Claudius' natural son, Britannicus.² Much was written in the ancient world about Claudius' demise and scholars since have found fertile ground in this topic, reaching a bewildering array of conclusions.³ Overwhelming ancient opinion was that Claudius was murdered by Agrippina so that Nero might assume the principate.⁴ Only Josephus and Seneca depart from this verdict. Josephus does not definitely state that Claudius was murdered, but merely offers this as one possible scenario.⁵ Seneca

¹ I would like to thank A.A. Barrett for his general support and guidance, R. Talbert for providing me with a copy of his article and the anonymous reader who made some useful suggestions. Any remaining errors or omissions are entirely the author's own.

² There are obvious parallels between this and Augustus making his stepson, Tiberius, emperor. There is also one major difference: Tiberius was not Augustus' first choice, whereas one of the reasons Claudius married Agrippina in the first place was to be able to offer the popular Nero as a successor. For Livia bringing children into her marriage with Augustus see Suet. *Aug.* 62.2 & *Tib.* 4.3 in the latter of which it is described as an attendant (and somewhat surprising) circumstance. Compare this with Tac. *Ann.* 12.2. Here Nero is used as an argument in favour of Agrippina's candidacy (*At Pallas id maxime in Agrippina laudare, quod Germanici nepotem secum traheret, dignum prorsus imperatoria fortuna: stirpem nobilem et familiae Iuliae Claudiaequae posteros coniungeret*).

³ Barrett (1996, 287-88 n.156) lists an incredible 40 scholars who have addressed the question of Claudius' death. Levick (1990, 77) and Barrett (1996, 137-42), whose discussion is the fullest to date, each offer evidence in support of both death by natural causes and murder. Levick leans slightly toward murder "on balance it looks as if Claudius' departure was brought about by Agrippina rather than due to her good luck". Barrett seems to lean in the opposite direction but refrains from committing himself on "Claudius' passing, whether natural or induced" (142), although earlier he does say "An opportunity for murder finally presented itself" (139). A good example of the standard opinion in favour of murder is Wiedermann *CAH*² p 241 ("On 13 October 54, Claudius suddenly dies after eating mushrooms. His death was most opportune for Agrippina and her son, and the fact that Narcissus happened to be away from the court for a short time seems too convenient to have been fortuitous."). Most recent is Werner Eck (2002, 150) who says "moderne Versuche, das is Zweifel zu ziehen, sind nicht sehr überzeugend."

⁴ Pseudo-Seneca *Octavia* 31 (*coniugis insidiis*), 44 (*coniugis scelere*), 102 (*per scelus raptio*), 164-65 (*miscuit coniunx vivo / venena saeva*); Pliny *N.H.* 22.92 (*veneno Tiberio Claudio principi per hanc occasionem ab coniuge Agrippina dato*); Juv. *Sat.* 5.147 (*boletus domino set quales Claudius edit*), 6.620-21 (*nocens erit Agrippinae boletus*); Martial 1.20.4 (*boletum qualem Claudius edit*); Tac. *Ann.* 12.66.1 (*Agrippina sceleris olim certa*), 12.67.1 (*adeoque cuncta mox pernotuere, ut temporum illorum scriptores prodiderint infusum delectabili cibo boleto venenum*); Suet. *Claud.* 44.2 (*veneno quidem occisum convenit*); Dio 61.34.1-4. (ἑρμακὼν τὶ ψυκτὸν προκataskeuῆσασα δι' αὐτᾶς οἷον τὴν κалуμσῆσων μὲν τῶν ἑσθῆ). Aurelius Victor, Orosius and Zosimus round out the list of ancient authors.

⁵ Jos. *Ant. Iud.* 20.148 (Ἰὸγοι ἄν παρ' τῶν). Philostratus (*Apoll.* 5.32) is also somewhat cautious (κατὰπερ ἄν Ἰὸγοι).

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provides posterity with a glimpse of what must have been the official version of Claudius' death.⁶ While most scholars follow the ancient consensus, there are several alternate theories which have been put forward.⁷ This paper will attempt to demonstrate that Claudius was not murdered by Agrippina, or anyone else, but rather, that he died from the accidental ingestion of a naturally poisonous mushroom and that there is no need for unnecessary scholarly caution.

Most of the evidence which is used to support the theory that Claudius was murdered is not only circumstantial, but also hearsay and none of it bears up to close scrutiny. Agrippina was supposedly motivated to murder Claudius because he was beginning to regret his marriage to her and his adoption of her son, Nero.⁸ She was also worried that Britannicus would soon reach the age at which he could assume the *toga virilis* and begin his own political career.⁹ This would make him a credible alternate to Nero and he might be more attractive to Claudius because he was the emperor's natural son. Suetonius claims that Claudius met Britannicus at some point, embracing him,

⁶ Sen. *Apoc.* 4.2 (*expiravit autem dum comoedos audit*). That Seneca uses the detail about the comedians as the basis for a joke (*ut scias me non sine causa illos timere*) suggests that it was common knowledge which accords well with it being the "official" version of Claudius' death. Suetonius (*Claud.* 45; *inducti per simulationem comoedi, qui velut desiderantem oblectarent*) refers to the call for comedians as part of the façade put on to make it appear that Claudius was still alive. Seneca also has Claudius accompanied to Olympus by Febris, the goddess of fever (6.1; *nisi fuisset illic Febris* and later mentioned at 6.2), which is undoubtedly a reference to the official cause of death. See Pack (1943, 150-51). For another theory of natural causes see Bagnani (1946, 18) "severe heart attack due to embolism or thrombosis."

⁷ Grimm-Samuel (1991, 178-82) suggests that the mushroom which killed Claudius was the naturally toxic *Amanita phalloides*, but see Barrett's (1996, 288 n.164) reservations which focus on the dormant period of this poison. Among other suggested causes of death are gastro-enteritis (Ferrero, 1911, 450), malaria (Pack, 1943, 150-51) and heart failure (Bagnani, 1946, 15-20). The most recent article on the subject (Valente, Talbert, Hallett, Mackowiak, April 1, 2002, 392-98) offers a muscarinic mushroom such as *amanita muscarina* as a naturally poisonous mushroom which may have caused Claudius' death. I am very grateful to R. Talbert for bringing this article to my attention.

⁸ Suet. *Claud.* 43 (*signa quaedam nec obscura paenitentis de matrimonio Agrippinae deque Neronis adoptione*). Tac. *Ann.* 12.64.2 (*sed in praecipue pavore Agrippina, vocem Claudii, quam temulentus iecerat, fatale sibi ut coniugum flagitia ferret, dein puniret*). Dio 60.34.1 (Ἐ δὲ Κλαύδιος τοῦ Ὀπιδίου τῆς Ἀγρίππης... ἡ δὲ ἄρρωστος).

⁹ Barrett (1996, 141) believes that Britannicus was more of a threat as he grew older and that this could be construed as motive for murder.

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encouraging him to grow up and promising to rectify his earlier promotion of Nero by giving Britannicus the *toga virilis* earlier than usual “so that the Roman people might finally have a real Caesar”¹⁰ Dio’s version is similar. His reconciliation scene between Claudius and Britannicus differs only in Claudius’ explicit promise to end Agrippina’s power, to allow Britannicus to assume the *toga virilis* early and to make him heir to the principate.¹¹ He also expands upon previous accounts by having Claudius’ seek out Britannicus whom Agrippina had purposely kept from him, evidently fearing just such a reconciliation. By comparison, Suetonius suggests that the meeting was chance (*obvium sibi Britannicum*). Tacitus’ version of this vignette contains many of these elements but has two important differences; one is that this encouragement of Britannicus comes from Narcissus, not Claudius.¹² Here, there is also an embrace and a prayer for Britannicus to grow up (which serves as an allusion to Britannicus’ upcoming assumption of the *toga virilis*, there being no specific reference to it). The other significant variation is that, whereas Claudius is looking to Britannicus becoming emperor, Narcissus emphasizes the opportunity Britannicus would have to take revenge on his father’s enemies and his mother’s killers. Contradicting Suetonius, Tacitus says that Claudius had not yet

¹⁰ *Claud. 43 (obvium sibi Britannicum artius complexus hortatus est, ut cresceret rationemque a se omnium factorum acciperet; . . . Cumque impubi teneroque adhuc, quando statura permetteret, togam dare destinasset, adiecit: “Ut tandem populus R. verum Caesarem habeat”).* The palpable irony here is that Britannicus is not a direct descendant of Augustus either naturally or by adoption and therefore is not a real Caesar while Nero (great-great-grandson) is. Placing such a ludicrous comment in Claudius’ mouth is consistent with the character which Suetonius constructs in his biography, but it is not *apropos* to the situation.

¹¹ Dio 60.34.1 (ka[^] tÕn ufÕn aÛtoà tÕn BrettanikÕn TMpizhtîn, TMx Ñfqalmîn aÛtù ep...thdej Øp' TMke...nhj t| poll| gignÕmenon, Nšrwni . . . pñnta trÕpon peripoioumšnhj tÕ krłtoj, ka[^] ÐpÕte TMntÛcoi filofrÕnwj sugginÕmenoj, oÛk ½negke tÕ gignÕmenon, çll' TMke...nhn te katalàsai ka[^] tÕn ufÕn TMj toÝj TMf»bouv TMsagage«n ka[^] diłdocon tÁj çrcÁj çpode«xai pareskeufzeto).

¹² *Ann. 12.65.3 (amplecti Britannicum, robur aetatis quam maturimum precari, modo ad deos, modo ad ipsum tendere manus, adolesceret, patris inimicos depellerent, matris etiam interfectores ulcisceretur).*

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reconciled with Britannicus. He says that Agrippina was unwilling to use a slow poison lest Claudius recognize the plot and renew his affection for his natural son.¹³

There are several serious problems with this change of heart which is suggested. The first is the similarity between this reconciliation and the one rumoured to have taken place between Augustus and Agrippa Postumus just before the former's death. Supposedly Augustus had sailed with Fabius Maximus to Planasia where he had a tearful reunion with Agrippa Postumus.¹⁴ In both cases the historical tradition is attempting to explain how an essentially good emperor (Augustus, Claudius) could have made such a poor choice, in hindsight, for his successor (Tiberius, Nero). In each case the wife is the prime instigator in attaining the principate for her son who is not the natural descendant of the emperor.¹⁵ In order to distance the good emperor from his bad successor, the good emperor is made to question the succession at the last moment. Being in the realm of literary *topoi*, we need to be very careful in assessing the validity of an account that shows such a close similarity to a previous event. Another *topos* is the tradition that

¹³ *Ann.* 12.66.1 (*dolo intellecto ad amorem filii rediret*).

¹⁴ *Tac. Ann.* 1.5.2 (*Planasiam vectum ad visendum Agrippam; multas illic utrumque lacrimas et signa caritatis spemque ex eo fore ut iuvenis penetibus avi redderetur*). The only evidence that Tacitus can offer in support of this is that Marcia broke down at her husband, Fabius Maximus' funeral, claiming that she had caused his death by telling Livia about Augustus' visit to see Agrippa Postumus.

¹⁵ A somewhat analogous scenario is that of Trajan's wife Plotina promoting Hadrian, despite Trajan's purported misgivings and ambivalent feelings towards Hadrian (*HAS, Hadrian* 4.1 & 10). Where this analogy falls down is in the fact that Hadrian was Trajan's relative (by marriage) rather than Plotina's. What is similar is the *topos* of the emperor's wife exerting undue influence, a *topos* which carries on at least as far as Justinian and his wife, Theodora. See Temporini (1978, 157-59) who discusses the parallel between the Agrippina/Claudius/Nero relationship and the Plotina/Trajan/Hadrian relationship as well as how the *favor Plotinae* which Hadrian received might have influenced Tacitus' portrayal of Livia and Agrippina. There would appear to be sufficient substantive differences to undermine this theory (Plotina was not related to Hadrian, whereas Livia and Agrippina were the mothers of Tiberius and Nero respectively. Also, in the case of Claudius, the emperor by-passed his own son in order to promote Nero whose introduction to the imperial family strengthened and solidified Claudius' own hold on power.)

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every Julio-Claudian died by foul play. Even Augustus and Tiberius who died at the ages of 76 and 78 respectively were rumoured to have been assassinated.¹⁶

This story is also undermined by the very nature of the communication with Britannicus. What is described is essentially a private meeting between individuals who were never able to record their conversation for posterity. Should such a meeting have taken place, and it is difficult to imagine that Claudius and/or Narcissus did not speak at some time or other to Britannicus, the contents of any conversation could only have been constructed through speculation and then become the fodder for gossip. This supposition is borne out by the variations and accretions which this meeting undergoes. Suetonius has Claudius urging Britannicus to grow up and deciding to give him the *toga virilis* before he reach the proper age so that the Roman people might have a true Caesar. This is clearly two versions which have been combined. First, Claudius hopes for his son to grow up so that he might be promoted; then he suddenly solves the problem by deciding to bestow the *toga virilis* upon him at an early age. Dio's account essentially follows Suetonius' except that he also has Claudius deciding to make Britannicus his heir. He also adds the detail that Agrippina had been keeping Britannicus away from Claudius, thereby explaining why such a meeting had not occurred earlier and increasing Agrippina's role as manipulator.

Tacitus, as has been noted, excludes Claudius entirely from this meeting, replacing him with Narcissus. This is part of Tacitus' decision to portray Claudius as

¹⁶ Tac. Ann. 1.5.1 (*gravescere valetudo Augusti et quidam scelus uxoris suspectabant*). Livia's barring access to the ailing Augustus until his death and Tiberius' succession is announced is also identical to Agrippina's *modus operandi* and should therefore excite our disbelief. See Scramuzza (1940, 93). Suet. Tib. 73.2, Cal. 12.2-3. Suetonius notes that Caligula was thought to have poisoned, starved, suffocated or strangled Tiberius. Such stories arose from Caligula's own admission that he contemplated assassinating Tiberius and the later personal *odium* which Caligula generated.

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completely passive in his relationships within his household. As a result, Tacitus indulges in a different irony from Suetonius. He has Narcissus, the prime instigator and actor in the fall of Messalina, praying that Britannicus avenge himself on his mother's killers.¹⁷ Not only does Tacitus not portray a reconciliation between Claudius and Britannicus, he goes so far as to suggest that such a move to reconciliation could only have been forced upon Claudius. When he says that Agrippina was concerned about using a slow poison to kill Claudius for fear that he might realize what was happening and reconcile with Britannicus, Tacitus is suggesting not only that Claudius is fairly disinterested in Britannicus but also that Claudius is not expected to change his attitude on his own.¹⁸

As for Claudius' plans regarding Britannicus' assumption of the *toga virilis*.¹⁹ It is obvious that he had no intention of granting his son the toga before it was due nor had he any plans to honour Britannicus by drawing political attention to the event. Britannicus was born on February 15, 41 and so would reach the age to receive the *toga virilis* in February 55.²⁰ Had Claudius been planning to begin a promotion of Britannicus he would surely have celebrated his son's assumption of the *toga virilis* when he himself

¹⁷ Tac. Ann. 12.65.3 (*precari, modo ad deos, modo ad ipsum tendere manus, adolesceret, patris inimicos depellerent, matris etiam interfectores ulcisceretur*). There is a similarity between Narcissus' prayer for revenge and Suetonius' report of Claudius' comment to Britannicus in Greek that the one who inflicted the wound would heal it (Ἐ τρῆσαϊ „£setai). This kind of variation again suggests that we are in the realm of gossip.

¹⁸ Tac. Ann. 12.66.1 (*si lentum et tabidum delegisset, ne admotus supremis Claudius et dolo intellecto ad amorem filii rediret*).

¹⁹ Levick (1990, 76) discusses Britannicus' assumption of the *toga virilis* and decides, agreeing with Dorey (1966, 155) that this was not the cause of a rift between Claudius and Agrippina in 54.

²⁰ For Britannicus' birth date see Suet. *Claud.* 27.2 (*Britannicum vicesimo imperii die inque secundo consulatu*). The contradiction in Suetonius as to whether Britannicus was born in 41 or 42 is solved by Tacitus (*Ann.* 13.15.1) who notes that Britannicus was about to complete his fourteenth year in 55 as well as by coinage produced in 41 with the legend SPES AUGUSTA (*RIC* 1² 118, 128). For a discussion of this see Levick (1990, 53 & 207 n.6).

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was consul. He had so honoured Nero when Nero assumed to the *toga virilis*.²¹ Suetonius tells us, however, that Claudius had not appointed any consuls past the month of his own death.²² Thus he gave no indication that he planned to draw attention to Britannicus' elevation to manhood. What is more, had Claudius wished to, he could have arranged for Britannicus to assume the *toga virilis* at the same age as Nero had been during his ceremony. Nero was just over thirteen years, three months old when he assumed the *toga virilis*, if the ceremony occurred at its normal time on March 17 during the Liberalia. The fact that Nero was already consul designate by March 4 of that same year suggests that the ceremony for Nero's assumption was held earlier in the year.²³ Britannicus was thirteen years and three months by mid-May, 54, when Claudius was still alive. Given the very real possibility that Nero assumed the *toga virilis* even earlier than that, Britannicus had reached Nero's "manhood age" by March 17, 54 and could well have assumed the *toga virilis* during the customary time had Claudius wished to begin the process of elevating Britannicus to the level of Nero. By passing up on this opportunity, Claudius clearly advertised that he had no such plans.

On the other hand, Claudius consistently and continually promoted both Agrippina and Nero throughout the second half of his reign.²⁴ Before itemizing that promotion it should be remembered that Claudius went to great efforts to secure his

²¹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.41.1 (*Ti. Claudio quintum Servio Cornelio Orfito consulibus virilis toga Neroni maturata*). Griffin (1984, 29) draws no connection between Claudius' consulship and Nero's assumption of the *toga virilis*. Levick (1990, 72-3) and Barrett (1996, 117) both note that Claudius' use of the consulship in this way parallels Augustus' similar use when he introduced Gaius and Lucius into public life in 5 and 2 BC respectively.

²² Suet. *Claud.* 46 (*nam et cum consules designaret, neminem ultra mensem quo obiit designavit*).

²³ For a discussion of Nero's assumption of the *toga virilis* relative to his being designated for the consulship see Levick (1990, 72-73, 210 n.14). See Barrett (1996, 116) for the suggestion of a pre-March 17 ceremony. It could also be noted that Tacitus notes Nero's assumption of the *toga virilis* as the first event of the year which could suggest that the ceremony occurred as early as January 51.

²⁴ For discussions on the promotion of Agrippina and Nero see Levick (1990, 71-75), Barrett (1996, 108-35).

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marriage to Agrippina.²⁵ He went on record before the Praetorian Guard that he would let them kill him if he ever married again.²⁶ The preparations which were considered to be necessary are detailed in four chapters of Tacitus' *Annals* (12.5-8). Vitellius began by sounding out the senate concerning the possibility of Claudius remarrying. When this was greeted with approval, he went on to suggest that Agrippina would be the ideal choice for Claudius' wife. The senate then clamoured for Claudius to marry and passed a decree legitimizing the marriage between an uncle and his brother's daughter. After the marriage Claudius performed expiatory sacrifices against incest in the grove of Diana.²⁷ Claudius clearly chose Agrippina because he felt he needed her and Nero's name and the direct connection to the lionized Germanicus.²⁸ When Claudius married Messallina he was not *princeps* and had no real expectation of attaining that position, being Caligula's senior by twenty-one years. Thus, his marriage to Messallina had far less political significance than his marriage to Agrippina and was entered into far more easily.²⁹ It took a major conspiracy involving Messallina, one of the consuls designate, as well as a number of other senators and equestrians who were in charge of armed men within Rome to push Claudius into ending both the marriage and Messallina's life.³⁰ If this is

²⁵ Barrett (1996, 100-02).

²⁶ Suet. *Claud.* 26.2 (*confirmavitque procontione apud praetorianos, quatenus sibi matrimonia male cederent, permansurum se in caelibatu, ac nisi permanisset, non recusaturum confodi manibus ipsorum*)

²⁷ Barrett (1996, 103) refers to these rites as an "embarrassing development". They may have been received badly, but they were likely a deliberate demonstration of Claudius' determination not to allow Eastern practices to infect traditional Roman values.

²⁸ While it is true that Claudius was Germanicus' brother, the political value of this connection does not seem to have been nearly as great as that of being a direct descendant as Agrippina and Nero were. That even Claudius recognized this fact is borne out by his efforts to emphasize his relationship with Germanicus not as his brother but as the foster-father of Agrippina (Suet. *Claud.* 29.2).

²⁹ Eck (2002, 117) recognizes that Messallina was not chosen to be an emperor's wife when she was married to Claudius.

³⁰ For Messallina's fall see Tac. *Ann.* 12.35-36 who lists as co-conspirators four senators (Gaius Silius, Iuncus Vergilianus, Suillius Caesoninus and Plautius Lateranus) and seven equestrians (Titius Proculus, Vettius Valens, Pompeius Urbicus, Saufeius Trogus, Decrius Calpurnianus, Sulpicius Rufus and Traulus

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Claudius' standard, then it is impossible to imagine him turning his household upside down on the basis of vague rumour and what can be most charitably described as nebulous second thoughts.

Agrippina's high position is anticipated by Vitellius when he states before the senate that a wife for Claudius would be a partner to whom he could confide his innermost thoughts.³¹ In the year after their marriage, Agrippina began the accumulation of honours, many of which Messallina never enjoyed even at the pinnacle of her influence. She was given the title of Augusta, previously bestowed only upon Livia and Antonia Maior.³² She had a colony, *Colonia Claudia Ara Augusta Agrippinensium*, named after her and she presided as a virtual equal to Claudius over the triumphal presentation of the defeated king, Caratacus, to the Praetorian Guard.³³ In 51 Agrippina was further honoured with the use of the *carpentum* and Tacitus tells us that her influence had reached such an extent that she was able to secure the Praetorian Prefecture for Afranius Burrus and an acquittal for Lucius Vitellius from a prosecution brought forward by Junius Lupus.³⁴ It might be argued that the promotion of Burrus was at the instigation of Claudius rather than Agrippina, but Vitellius, after his work in helping to pave the way

Montanus). One of Claudius' previous marriages, to Plautia Urgulanilla, was ended because Urgulanilla was carrying a child fathered by one of his freedmen, Botes (Suet. *Claud.* 27.1).

³¹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.5.3 (*levamentum quam adsumere coniugem, prosperis dubiisque sociam, cui cogitationes intimas*). Tacitus (*Ann.* 12.37.4) later refers to Agrippina's being a partner in rule (*imperii sociam*) during his account of her presiding over the triumphal display of Caratacus. Temporini (1978, 4) notes that Agrippina surpassed her predecessors and successors in political involvement.

³² For the title of Augusta see Tac. *Ann.* 12.26.1 (*augetur et Agrippina cognomento Augusta*); *RIC* 1² 125 n.75, 126 n. 80-81, 130 n.117 & 119; *ILS* 222, *CIL* 2.963, 6.20384. It would seem that Livia received the title Augusta in part because she was adopted by Augustus while Antonia Maior received the title posthumously and so obviously never exercised it.

³³ For Agrippina's colony see Tac. *Ann.* 12.27.1 (*oppidum Ubiorum, in quo genita erat, veteranos coloniamque deduci impetrat, cui nomen inditum e vocabulo ipsius*). Temporini (1978, 30-31) notes that Agrippina was the first wife of an emperor who was so honoured. For her presiding over the triumphal display of Caratacus see Tac. *Ann.* 12.37.4 (*absoluti Agrippinam quoque, haud procul alio suggestu conspicuam, isdem quibus principem laudibus gratibusque venerati sunt*).

³⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 12.42. For the use of the *carpentum* see also *RIC* 1² p.129 n.103.

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for Claudius' marriage to Agrippina, was closely linked with the emperor's wife.³⁵ Finally, in 52 Agrippina's influence was again to be felt in her influence in the appointment of Antonius Felix to the procuratorship of Judaea and his acquittal at the expense of Ventidius Cumanus as well as in her presiding alongside Claudius at the ceremonies for the draining of the Fucine Lake.³⁶

All evidence clearly shows that Agrippina enjoyed a position as virtual partner in the governing of the Roman empire with Claudius and that this position remained intact throughout the second half of Claudius' reign. One final piece of proof, if such were needed, can be found in the early reign of Nero when Agrippina was displeased when one of Claudius' edicts (the one compelling quaestors designate to produce gladiatorial games) was abrogated.³⁷ This demonstration of loyalty to the deceased emperor is all the more noteworthy in that the edict in question was passed while Claudius was still married

³⁵ The fact that Burrus had been procurator for Livia and Tiberius, before fulfilling that role for Claudius, (*ILS* 1321) strongly suggests that his ties would have been with Claudius rather than Agrippina who, at this point in time had only been a member of Claudius' household for two years. Given Tiberius' unfriendly attitude towards the family of Germanicus, it would be more likely that Burrus would not have been well disposed toward Agrippina. With regard to Vitellius, it does not matter whether the marriage was at the instigation of Claudius or Agrippina. What matters is that Vitellus openly supported the marriage in the senate, thereby aligning himself with Agrippina.

³⁶ For Agrippina's influence in support of Antonius Felix see Tac. *Ann.* 12.54 and Jos. *Iud. Ant.* 20.117-37. The two accounts are at variance. According to Tacitus when the disturbance broke out between the Jews and Samaritans, Cumanus and Felix were jointly in charge of the province, the governor of Syria, Ummidius Quadratus was appointed to resolve the dispute and Felix was not only acquitted, but also sat among the judges while Cumanus was convicted. Josephus represents the dispute as being between Cumanus and the Samaritans on the one hand and the Jews on the other. It is only by the intercession of Agrippina (at the behest of Agrippa II) that Claudius decided to exile Cumanus. In both versions, Agrippina's influence can be seen, explicitly so in Josephus' account which is also the more believable. For the opening of the Fucine Lake see Tac. *Ann.* 12.56.3 (*neque procul Agrippina chlamyde aurata praesedere*), Dio 60.33.3 (¼ te 'Agrippina clamÚdi diacrÚsJ™kosm»qh). Suetonius (*Claud.* 20.1, 21.6, 32) recalls the draining of the Fucine Lake three times without mentioning Agrippina. For discussions on the various honours bestowed upon Agrippina see Barrett (1996, 108-09) Augusta, (114-15) colony, (123) attack on Vitellius and triumph over Caratacus, (124) *carpentum*, (125-27) trial of Felix Antonius, (129-30) ceremony at the draining of the Fucine Lake.

³⁷ For the original edict see Tac. *Ann.* 11.22.2. For its annulment see Tac. *Ann.* 13.5.2 (*ne designatis quaestoribus edendi gladiatores necessitas esset. Quod quidem adversante Agrippina, tamquam acta Claudii subverterentur*).

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to Messalina.³⁸ Agrippina was not merely defending the decisions made by Claudius over which she may have had some influence, she was defending the entire reign of Claudius. This would suggest that her loyalty was to her husband, rather than to herself which, in turn, makes Agrippina an unlikely murderer. Had Claudius begun to have misgivings about his marriage to Agrippina, it is difficult to imagine Agrippina remaining so loyal. Agrippina's loyalty is also to be expected given the close connection that Claudius created between himself and his niece when he repeatedly referred to her as his foster-daughter.³⁹ Had she been so inclined, Agrippina could have joined those who snickered behind their hands at some of the aspects of Claudius' reign.⁴⁰ She chose not to.

As much as Agrippina was honoured and promoted throughout Claudius' reign, Nero enjoyed honours and promotion, especially political, which were even more extensive.⁴¹ In the same year that Claudius married Agrippina, he betrothed his daughter, Octavia, to the then Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus.⁴² In the next year Claudius adopted Nero into the Claudian *gens*, the first time anyone had ever been so adopted.⁴³ Apart

³⁸ On Agrippina's loyalty to Claudius' reign after his death see Barrett (1996, 98).

³⁹ Suet. *Claud.* 29.2 (*filiam et alumnam*).

⁴⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 13.3.1 for a derisive reaction to parts of Nero's eulogy of Claudius. Of course, the entire Apocolocyntosis is a monument to those whose respect for Claudius was minimal.

⁴¹ For discussions of Nero's promotion by Claudius see Griffin (1984, 29-30) who believes that Claudius "astonished" when he adopted Nero. Levick (1990, 70-75) catalogues the honours which formed Nero's promotion, suggesting that Claudius' position was too weak for him to rely on the seven year old Britannicus. Not included in the discussion of the promotion of Nero is the selection of Seneca as tutor to Nero. It is difficult to truly appreciate whose decision this was given Claudius' distaste for the man and Agrippina's distaste for philosophy. The central position of Nero in Claudius' decision to marry Agrippina is suggested by a coinage issue which depicts Agrippina and has the legend AGRIPPA AUG CLAUD NERONIS CAES MATER (*BMC Emp.* 1 200f). Even before Nero's accession, Agrippina was defined not only by her relationship to the emperor as Claudius' wife, but also by her relationship to Nero. It would seem that he was more important than she was.

⁴² Tac. *Ann.* 12.9.1 (*qua oraretur Claudius despondere Octaviam Domitio*), Suet. *Claud.* 27.2 (*Octaviam Neroni privigno suo collocavit*). Levick (1990, 71) notes the precedent offered by Augustus' betrothing his daughter, Julia, first to Marcellus and later to Tiberius. See also Barrett (1996, 105-06).

⁴³ Tac. *Ann.* 12.25.1 (*adoptio in Domitium auctoritate Pallantis festinatur . . . Adnotabant periti nullam antehac adoptionem inter patricos Claudios reperiri, eosque ab Atto Clauso continuos duravisse*), Suet.

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from the setting of precedent, Claudius had to have his daughter and Nero's fiancée, Octavia, adopted into another family to avoid the appearance of an incestuous relationship.⁴⁴ Once again extraordinary efforts were made by Claudius to re-arrange his household to accommodate the promotion of Nero. In 51 Nero assumed the *toga virilis* before he reached the requisite age of fourteen.⁴⁵ As has been mentioned above, this probably occurred earlier in the year than the normal occasion of the Liberalia. The assumption of the *toga virilis* signaled the point at which Nero could be granted a number of political honours. He was made the *princeps iuventutis* as Gaius and Lucius had been under Augustus.⁴⁶ He was co-opted into all the priesthoods above and beyond the usual maximum number of priests for each college.⁴⁷ He was granted proconsular power outside the city of Rome and was elected consul designate, his consulship to be undertaken when he was nineteen.⁴⁸ Some time after this Nero sat as a judge during the Latin Festival when Claudius allowed him to hear important cases, a practice which he had previously forbidden on such occasions.⁴⁹ To recommend him to the people and soldiers a donative was given to the latter, a largess to the former, both in Nero's name.⁵⁰

Claud. 27.2, 39.2 (*divulgavit neminem unquam per adoptionem familiae Claudiae insertum*); *Nero* 7, *Dio* 60.33.2², *RIC* 1² 125 n.75-79, 126 n.82-83, 131 n.121 (NERO CLAUD DRUSUS GERM). Suetonius reveals that at least one of the anonymous experts referred to in Tacitus was actually Claudius. For Suetonius this is an example of Claudius' metewr...a and øbley...a. See Barrett (1996, 111-13).

⁴⁴ *Dio* 60.33.2² (τὸν quagatšra TMj »terÒn ti gšnoj TMkpoi»saj †na m³/₄ ødelfoÝj sunoik...zein dokÍ).

⁴⁵ *Tac. Ann.* 12.41.1 (*virilis toga Neroni maturata, quo capessendae rei publicae habilis videretur*), *Dio* 60.33.2^c (toà d□ Nšrwnoj . . . TMj toÝj TMf»bouj TMggrafšntoj).

⁴⁶ *Tac. Ann.* 12.41.1 (*ac princeps iuventutis appellaretur*), *RIC* 1² 125 n.75-83, 126 n.82-83, 131 n.121 (PRINC[ipi] IUVENT).

⁴⁷ *RIC* 1² 125 n.76-77 (SACERD COOPT IN OMN CONL SUPRA NUM EX S C). Note that this was done by decree of the senate. Tacitus chooses to omit this from his narrative

⁴⁸ *Tac. Ann.* 12.41.1 (*ut vicensimo aetatis anno consulatum Nero iniret atque interim designatus proconsulare imperium extra urbem haberet*), *RIC* 1² 125 n.78-79, 131 n.121 (COS DES). For this package of honours bestowed upon Nero see Barrett (1996, 116-18).

⁴⁹ *Suet. Nero* 7.2 (*auspicatus est et iuris dictionem praefectus urbi sacro Latinarum, celeberrimis patronis non tralaticias, ut assolet, et brevis, sed maximas plurimasque postulationes certatim ingerentibus, quamvis interdictum a Claudio esset*).

⁵⁰ *Tac. Ann.* 12.41.1 (*additum nomine eius donativum militi, congiarium plebei*), *Suet. Nero* 7.2 (*deductus in Forum tiro populo congiarium, militi donativum proposuit*).

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In the areas of religion and *imperium* Nero officially was second only to Claudius. His popularity with the people and army were confirmed. Nero was indisputably the heir apparent from this point on. This was further emphasized by juxtaposing Nero in triumphal dress with Britannicus in juvenile white when they paraded before the people during games at the Circus.⁵¹ By making his successor so clear, Claudius created dynastic stability. There was no jockeying for position as is portrayed by Tacitus when various freedmen suggested wives to Claudius to replace Messallina. If there were any concerns on Claudius' part about his own security, the clear promotion of Nero in some ways offered protection. Nero was old enough to be given an opportunity to gain political experience, as the historical record shows, but at the same time he was too young to assume the principate. He was not to assume the consulship for five years and would not reach the normal minimum age to be quaestor for ten. In practical terms Claudius would have to serve for quite some time before Nero was truly ready to become emperor.

Two years later in 53 Nero married Octavia.⁵² The year was more significant, however, for the demonstration and exercise of Nero's political position. Nero appeared before the senate and successfully pleaded on behalf of a number of communities; Bononia, Rhodes, Ilium and Apamea.⁵³ This advocacy made Nero a direct patron of these communities and, more importantly, gave him experience and exposure in the

⁵¹ Tac. Ann. 12.41.2 (*ludicro circensium, quod adquirendis vulgi studiis edebatur, Britannicus in praetexta, Nero triumphali veste travecti sunt*).

⁵² Tac. Ann. 12.58.1 (*sedecim annos natus Nero Octaviam Caesaris filiam in matrimonium accepit*), Suet. Nero 7.2 (*nec multo post duxit uxorem Octaviam*), Dio 60.33.11 (ka^ˆ t³/₄n 'Oktab...an d • t⁰te œghmen, éste ka^ˆ TMk toÚtou çn³/₄r ½dh doke(n).

⁵³ Tac. Ann. 12.58 (*causa Iliensium suscepta . . . ut Ilienses omni publico munere solverentur. Eodem oratore Bononiensi coloniae igni haustae subventum centiens sestertii largitione. Reddita Rhodiis libertas . . . tributumque Apamensibus terrae motu convolsis in quinquennium remissum*), Suet. Nero 7.2 (*pro Bononiensibus Latine, pro Rhodiis atque Iliensibus Graece verba fecit*).

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senate, allowing him to establish a reputation and rapport with that body. The excellent reception which Nero received can be inferred by Nero's later plan to abolish all indirect taxation; a move contemplated to generate public good will.⁵⁴ In the same year Nero vowed to produce games for Claudius' return to good health when the emperor fell ill. When Claudius recovered, the people were suitably entertained, although there is disagreement as to the exact form of that entertainment.⁵⁵ Finally, there is a marble relief from Carthage, dated to 54 which depicts three figures; Venus, Mars and a third figure which it has been suggested depicts Nero.⁵⁶ Here we have tangible evidence that Nero was still being elevated late in Claudius' reign when the emperor was supposedly having doubts about the succession.

This formidable list of honours and promotions which Claudius bestowed upon Nero demonstrate a determined policy, the sole purpose of which was to have Nero be accepted as the successor by the important sectors of Roman Imperial political life; the people, the army and the senate.⁵⁷ After firmly establishing this succession over the course of five years, Claudius would have been creating enormous political instability had he suddenly changed the succession by either preferring Britannicus to Nero or

⁵⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 13.50.1 (*dubitavit Nero, an cuncta vectigalia omitti iuberet idque pulcherrimum donum generi mortalium daret*). Griffin (1984, 47) notes that this gift would have been for the Italians only who already enjoyed zero direct taxation. Thus, the provinces would have borne the entire tax burden of the empire.

⁵⁵ Suet. *Nero* 7.2 (*ediditque pro Claudii salute circenses et venationem*) Dio 60.33.9 (Nos»santoj d • met! taàta toà Klaud...ou e,,sÁlqen Ð Nšrwn e,,j tÕ sunšdrion, ka^ e,, çnarrwsqe...h Ð KlaÚdioj fppodrom...an Øpšsceto), 11 (·a...santoj d□ toà Klaud...ou t³⁄⁴n fppodrom...an Ð Nšrwn megaloprepîj™petšlese). Suetonius describes the event produced by Nero as circus games and a beast hunt whereas Dio mentions only horse races.

⁵⁶ D. Fishwick, CACW Conference, Vancouver, Canada, Feb 2002.

⁵⁷ In Dio this culminates in a proclamation to the people and letter to the senate both by Claudius that Nero was ready to assume the administration of the empire (60.33.10; çnšpeise tÕn KlaÚdion tù te d»mJ™k prografÁj dhlisai ka^ tî gerous...v™pisteçlai Óti, k'n aÚtÕj çpoq£noi, Ð Nšrwn t! koin! fkanÕj ½dh™st^ dioikiün).

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creating a dual succession.⁵⁸ The entire purpose in marrying Agrippina and adopting Nero was to create stability for his own reign after the debacle surrounding the ‘Fall of Messallina’ with the senators and equestrians who were involved in that.⁵⁹ Every covert act on Claudius’ part was in support of Agrippina and Nero, promoting the former as his partner and the latter as his successor. This policy had been successful for five years and nothing had occurred to cause Claudius to make even a slight alteration let alone a fundamental change such as replacing Nero in the succession with Britannicus. There was no motive for Agrippina and, in fact, she had good reason to want Claudius to live longer than he did. Nero’s apprenticeship still lacked one vital element, field experience leading an army.⁶⁰

Another argument supporting the theory that Claudius was murdered is the fact that Narcissus was conveniently out of Rome when Claudius died. According to Tacitus Narcissus decided to devote his life to Claudius’ safety when he realized that he had no future under Nero.⁶¹ Agrippina seemed to feel it was unsafe to make an attempt on Claudius’ life while Narcissus was nearby to keep watch and either waited until the freedman went to Sinuessa in Campania (according to Tacitus) or sent him there herself

⁵⁸ The precedent for creating a dual succession was considerable but would not have encouraged Claudius to follow. Tiberius’ leaving Caligula and Tiberius Gemellus as co-heirs was a disaster and Claudius tended to avoid following Tiberius with whom he had had such a poor relationship. Augustus had set Gaius and Lucius as co-heirs early in his reign and Tiberius and Germanicus towards the end. Neither of these precedents are particularly on point. Gaius and Lucius were brothers while Tiberius and Germanicus were not planned to be concurrent heirs but consecutive since Germanicus was Tiberius’ heir.

⁵⁹ See n. 30.

⁶⁰ This proved to be one of the principle reason’s for the premature end to Nero’s reign. He seemed to have a complete disregard for the army (Griffith 1984, 185).

⁶¹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.65.1 (*verum ita de se meritum Caesarem, ut vitam usui eius impenderet*). For a discussion of this difficult passage see Aveline (2000, 126-27). Barrett (1996, 140) shows proper skepticism regarding the contradiction inherent in the idea that Narcissus would have been aware of Claudius’ change of mind and yet would still have absented himself from Rome during such a critical moment in imperial household politics.

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(Dio's version).⁶² This is supposedly borne out by Narcissus' murder coming so soon after Claudius'.⁶³ As with Claudius' death, there is no independent evidence that Narcissus was murdered. It is only the assumption that Claudius was murdered which supports the theory that Narcissus was also murdered. On the other hand, we know that Narcissus' health was not particularly good. He evidently suffered from what was diagnosed as gout and had gone to Sinuessa for treatment. We also know that the year 54 was such an unhealthy one in Rome that even the highest classes were somewhat decimated.⁶⁴ This is, of course, as relevant to Claudius' death as it is for Narcissus' as shall be noted again in due course. Nor should Narcissus' trip to Sinuessa receive a sinister interpretation. This particular curative was quite popular, in general, and particularly in Claudius' court circle. Both Claudius and Seneca are recorded as 'taking the waters' for their healthful benefits.⁶⁵ It was entirely natural for Narcissus to do the same. Narcissus' absence and subsequent death do not prove or even suggest that

⁶² Tac. Ann. 12.66.1 (*in tanta mole curarum valetudine adversa corripitur, refovendisque viribus mollita caeli et salubritate aquarum Sinuessam pergit*), Dio 60.34.4 (ταῦτα δὲ δῆλον ἄγριππῆς ποσειδάωνος οὐκ ὅτι τὸν Νερκίσσον ἤκουσεν ἅμα καὶ τοῦ ὕδατος ὅτι καὶ πρὸς τὴν πόλιν ἔρχοντο πολλοὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ἰταλίας, ἀπὸ τῆς ἰταλίας ἔρχοντο πολλοὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ἰταλίας. τοιοῦτον τὴν φύλαξ τὸν ἀποστόλου Ἄν)

⁶³ Tac. Ann. 13.1.3 (*nec minus properato Narcissus Claudii libertus, de cuius iurgiis adversus Agrippinam rettuli, aspera custodia et necessitate extrema ad mortem agitur*), Sen Apoc.13.2 (*antecesserat iam compendiaria Narcissus libertus ad patronum excipiendum . . . ait 'quid di ad homines?' . . . itaque quamvis podagricus esset*). Seneca, of course, portrays Narcissus' death as being from natural causes rather than murder. Exactly how soon Narcissus died after Claudius is somewhat obscure. Seneca (*Apoc.* 13.2 makes the joke that Narcissus was "*nitidus, ut erat a balineo*", implying that Narcissus was in Sinuessa when he died, Sinuessa being known for the restorative power of its waters. On the other hand, Seneca also has Narcissus refer to Mercury and Claudius as "*di*" as if he knew that Claudius had been deified. See Pack (1943, 150-51). Dio (60.34.5) notes that Narcissus burnt correspondence of Claudius which referred to Agrippina suggesting that he was aware of Claudius' death before he himself died.

⁶⁴ Tac. Ann. 12.64.1 (*numerabatur inter ostenta deminutus omnium magistratuum numerus, quaestore, aedili, tribuno ac praetore et consule paucos intra menses defunctis*), Suet. Claud. 46 (*et quod eodem anno ex omnium magistratuum genere plerique mortem obierant*), Dio 60.35.1 (καὶ ὅτι ἡ πόλις ἐκείνη ἐφ' ἧς ἐστὶν ἡ τελευτῆς). Noted by Pack (1943, 151), Levick (1990, 77), Barrett (1996, 141-42).

⁶⁵ For Seneca's use of the waters in Campania see Sen. *Ep.* 104. For Claudius see Pliny *N.H.* 29.7 and Dio 60.6.1. The significance of this is noted by Pack (1943, 150-51).

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Claudius was murdered. In fact, it is more logical to view the actions and fate of Narcissus as supporting the theory that Claudius died of natural causes.

Later comments by Nero and Domitian are also offered as proof that Claudius was killed by poisoned mushrooms. Nero's seems to be the most damning and are recalled by Suetonius and Dio. Nero was said to have referred to mushrooms as the food of the gods since it was by eating one that Claudius became a god.⁶⁶ Suetonius and Dio use this as proof of either Nero's knowledge of Claudius' murder (Suetonius) or his actual involvement (Dio). There is also the fear of mushrooms which Domitian suffered and which his father, Vespasian, derided.⁶⁷ This is interpreted as an allusion to Claudius' murder and the lesson learned by the unpopular Domitian that murder by poisoning was a real threat and that mushrooms had been the vehicle for such an act once before. This does not necessarily follow. In neither case is any mention made of poison being added to mushrooms. In fact, it is the mushrooms themselves which are viewed as the active element. It is much more logical to take these comments as referring to mushrooms which are naturally poisonous, rather than to non-toxic mushrooms which are tampered with. In the case of Nero's joke the question has to be raised whether Nero would joke about the death of Claudius if it had been a murder. If Claudius had been poisoned we would expect Nero to be especially circumspect. Such a joke implies that, at the time of its telling, there were no awkward feelings or suspicions concerning Claudius' death. There was also the infamous banquet at which several people including Annaeus Seneca

⁶⁶ Suet. *Nero* 33.1 (*cuius necis etsi non auctor, conscius fuit, neque dissimulanter, ut qui boletos, in quo cibi genere venenum is acceperat, quasi deorum cibum posthac proverbio Graeco conlaudare sit solitus*), Dio 60.35.4 (ka^ Ð Nšrwn d□ oÜk çpfxion mn»mhj çpoj katšlipe. toÝj g|r mÚkhtaj qeîn brîma œlegen e□ nai, Óti ka^ TMke«noj di| toà mÚkhtoj qeÕj TMgegÕne). Barrett (1996, 141) suggests that Nero's joke supported the theory that the mushroom eaten by Claudius was naturally poisonous.

⁶⁷ Suet. *Dom.* 14.1 (*pater quoque super cenam quondam fungis abstinentem palam irriserat*). Barrett (1996, 141) interprets Domitian's fear as stemming from naturally poisonous mushrooms.

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died after eating naturally poisonous mushrooms.⁶⁸ These three anecdotes about mushrooms would all seem to suggest that if it were mushrooms which killed Claudius they were naturally toxic ones, not poisoned by human agency. We shall see other evidence which also points us in the same direction.

Finally, the suppression of Claudius' will is cited as suggesting that Agrippina was involved in some underhanded machinations of which this was the one covert act. The inference which has been made is that Claudius had recently changed his will in a way that brought Britannicus into greater prominence at Nero's expense.⁶⁹ As has been shown, there is no reason to believe that Claudius ever even contemplated such a move. It would have been a practical impossibility to divide the vast estates which the *princeps* now held throughout the empire. We should also be careful about assuming that merely because the will was not read that its provisions were not honoured. Two other wills which were suppressed or ignored have their fates described in different terms by Suetonius. Livia's will is said to have been suppressed (*suppresserat*) and void (*irrito*) and Tiberius' will is described in similar terms (*inrita, abolito*).⁷⁰ It is expressly stated that these wills were not legally followed but that their bequests were honoured out of the

⁶⁸ Pliny, *N.H.* 22.96 (*tertium genus suilli, venenis accommodatissimi. Familias nuper interemere et tota convivium, Annaeum Serenum, praefectum Neronis vigilum, et tribunos centurionesque*). Barrett (1996, 141) notes the significance of this event for considering possibility that Claudius was killed by a naturally poisonous mushroom. Such an incident is a much better explanation for Domitian's fear of mushrooms.

⁶⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.69.3 (*testamentum tamen haud recitatum, ne antepositus filio privignus iniuria et invidia animos vulgi turbaret*). Levick (1990, 78) believes that the will made Nero and Britannicus joint heirs and that this was the reason it was not read, basing her supposition on Claudius' last speech before the senate in which he commended both of his sons to their care, Suet. *Claud.* 46 (*in senatu, cui novissime interfuit, multum ad concordiam liberos suos cohortatus, utriusque aetatem suppliciter patribus commendavit*). Barrett (1996, 139) notes the will as "one practical development . . . as a result of Claudius' supposed change of heart".

⁷⁰ Suetonius on Livia's will; *Tib.* 51.2 (*testamentum quoque eius pro irrita habuit*), *Gaius* 16.3 (*et Iuliae Augustae, quod Tiberius suppresserat*): on Tiberius' will; *Gaius* 14.1 (*inrita Tiberi voluntate, qui testamento alterum nepotem suum praetextatum adhuc coheredem ei dederat*), 16.3 (*ex testamento Tiberi quamquam abolito*).

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generosity of the *princeps*. On the other hand, Suetonius does not say that Claudius' will was suppressed or made void. Given that he notes this for Livia's and Tiberius' wills, it should be expected that he would inform his reader if Claudius' will had suffered the same fate. A will's suppression is very different from its not being read, which is what Tacitus says happened to Claudius' will. Tacitus actually suggests that Claudius' will was not read because its provisions were entirely in Nero's favour and that there was fear that this would create ill-will among the people.⁷¹ It seems highly unlikely that after several years in which Britannicus was consistently relegated to the background while Nero was constantly favoured by Claudius, there would be sudden concern about this final show of preference on the part of Claudius. What is more unlikely is that Tacitus would pass up an opportunity to cast Agrippina in an even more sinister light by having her alter Claudius' wishes by suppressing the will. Whatever the will's contents, the fact that an historian as hostile to Agrippina as Tacitus assumed that Claudius' will completely favoured Nero is yet another strong argument that Claudius' favour for Nero never waned.

So it would seem that none of the arguments offered in support of the theory that Claudius was murdered is able to hold up to scrutiny. Under close analysis most of these arguments either evaporate or are actually turned against themselves and support the theory that Claudius died of natural causes. If this were all the evidence we have which relates to Claudius' death, we would have to admit that murder was unlikely. There is, however, considerable evidence which can be put forward to support the theory that

⁷¹ Levick (1990, 78) believes that Tacitus got this wrong, logically reasonable, but it still begs the question of why Tacitus records the reasons he does for Claudius' will not being read.

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Claudius died of natural causes or, to be more specific, that his death was by misadventure, caused by the accidental ingestion of naturally poisonous mushrooms.

To begin with there is the relatively poor health of Claudius to consider. Before he became emperor he had suffered from serious ailments as a child and young man which mainly affected his motor control. The most compelling diagnosis offered to explain his symptoms is that of dystonia.⁷² Although Suetonius says that his health was good after he became emperor except for bouts of indigestion which nearly drove him to suicide, Claudius' lifestyle was not conducive to good health.⁷³ Apart from his custom to eat and drink to excess, he sat as a judge for cases during the summer months when Rome was at its most unhealthy and those who could left the city.⁷⁴ There are also the two facts which have already been presented; that Claudius had been so ill the year before that Nero vowed games for his recovery and that 54 seems to have been such an unhealthy year that one sitting member of each magistracy died within the span of a few months.⁷⁵ That Claudius should fall ill and die in such a climate should be expected rather than surprising.

⁷² Suet. *Claud.* 2.1-2, 3.2, , Dio 60.2.1-4. Levick (1990, 13) favours the diagnosis that Claudius suffered some sort of cerebral palsy with spasticity. Valente (2002, 394-95) diagnoses Claudius with dystonia probably caused by a premature birth. Among the less likely causes of this dystonia is cerebral palsy.

⁷³ Suet. *Claud.* 31 (*valitudine sicut olim gravi, ita princeps prospera usus est excepto stomachi dolore, quo se correptum etiam de consciscenda morte cofitasse dixit*).

⁷⁴ For Claudius' behaviour as a gourmand see Suet. *Claud.* 33.1 (*cibi vinique quocumque et tempore et loco appetentissimus . . . nec temere unquam triclinio abscessit nisi distentus ac madens*), Dio 60.2.5-6 (ἄπῆτ...ῆντο δ' αὐτὸν οἰνὸν τε τοῖς πρὸ τοῦ μάλιστα καὶ τῆν ταῖς μ...ῆσι. πῶν γὰρ ἐπὶ ἄστωι ἐμφοτῆροισι σφ...σι προσῆκετο). For his custom of trying cases during the summer months see Suet. *Claud.* 23.1 (*rerum actum divisium antea in hibernos aestivosque menses coniunxit*). Pack (1943, 150-51), Barrett (1996, 141-42).

⁷⁵ Claudius' illness in 53 is overlooked by Valente (2002, 392) who says that Claudius "the patient had enjoyed reasonably good health for over a decade." Pack (1943, 150-51), Barrett (1996, 135). Bagnani (1946, 15) makes a great deal out of the Claudius' illness in 53, pointing out that Agrippina nursed Claudius during this time and could have gotten rid of him then by simple neglect.

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The very descriptions of the murder undermine their own credibility by their variant details and the trend exhibited through which greater detail is added as the story is retold. There are, essentially, two versions of Claudius' murder. One is that Claudius was poisoned by his taster, Halotus, while dining with the priests on the citadel.⁷⁶ The other is that he was poisoned by Agrippina while dining at home. This second version is subject to numerous variations and accretions. Suetonius says that Agrippina poisoned Claudius with a dish of mushrooms, his favourite food, and that he either died after spending the night in severe pain and unable to speak or that he passed out, threw up and then was given a second dose of poison, administered by gruel or an enema.⁷⁷ Tacitus' combination of the variations into one account has Agrippina gathering Locusta, Halotus and Xenophon together in a plot to assassinate Claudius. Locusta supplies a poison which is supposed to be perfectly suited to Agrippina's demand in that it is neither so fast as to arouse suspicion nor so slow as to alert Claudius to his imminent fate. Halotus introduces the poison into some choice mushrooms. When Claudius is not killed by this poison, Xenophon is called upon to administer a second dose of poison, this time through the agency of a feather put down Claudius' throat to induce vomiting.⁷⁸ Dio's account, as it survives, contains certain elements of these stories. Agrippina obtains a poison from Locusta and uses mushrooms as the vehicle. Claudius passes out and dies without uttering another word. A new artifice is added; Agrippina poisons only one mushroom

⁷⁶ Suet. *Claud.* 44.2 (*quidam tradunt epulanti in arce cum sacerdotibus per Halotem spadonem praegustatorem*).

⁷⁷ Suet. *Claud.* 44.2-3. Townend (1960, 109-110) discusses the sources Suetonius used and concludes that Pliny relayed the version in which Agrippina acted with Locusta whereas Cluvius Rufus was the source of the story that Halotus poisoned Claudius' drink. He goes on to note that Tacitus combined these two accounts into one.

⁷⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 12.66-67.

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and eats from the others.⁷⁹ These accounts, taken individually or as a group, are highly improbable and should arouse considerable suspicion in the reader. In the case of Dio there is the added detail of how Agrippina so cleverly attempted to avert suspicion from the poisoning by eating from the same dish as Claudius. This detail smacks of the type of addition which is made to a story to enhance its verisimilitude or make entertainment value. It is emblematic of a piece of gossip which is circulated and embellished, rather than the description of an event told from knowledge.

Suetonius' multiple versions show just to what extent gossip circulated concerning Claudius' death. There is no agreement as to where Claudius was when he was poisoned (the citadel or at home), who administered the poison (Halotus or Agrippina), or whether he died of that first dose or had to be poisoned a second time. Even this second poisoning invites speculation as to how the poison was administered. Also, even if one of the versions Suetonius offers were the correct one (and Suetonius does not favour any one variation), the majority of what he writes would have to be wrong. What these variations demonstrate is that observers outside the family saw Claudius fall ill or pass out and be taken from the dining area to his private chambers. All other details are the products of speculation, in some cases quite ludicrous speculation. It has been pointed out, for example, that poison cannot effectively be administered through an enema.⁸⁰

Tacitus' description is obviously a synthesis of the variations paraded by Suetonius and therefore suspicious since the historian does not question whether Claudius

⁷⁹ Dio 60.34.2-3. He also notes that the one poisoned mushroom was the biggest and finest of all. This is reminiscent of the apple which Sleeping Beauty eats, a purely dramatic act that pushes Dio's version further into the realm of invention.

⁸⁰ Barrett (1996, 141).

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was poisoned but merely attempts, rather unsuccessfully, to render an account which explains the existence of the numerous variations by accommodating them all. This also serves to undermine. An expert poisoner is consulted to provide the perfect poison but her choice is a failure.⁸¹ Halotus is brought into the story in all likelihood to explain why he survived Claudius' poisoning.⁸² His survival would have been more noticeable because of his later elevation to a procuratorship under Galba.⁸³ Agrippina's involvement of Xenophon is difficult to understand if she already had an expert poisoner. In the actual event, as Tacitus tells it, the physician was needed to administer the final lethal poison, but surely Agrippina would not have assumed she would need the services of a doctor. Bringing him in on a plot would only increase the chances of its detection. There is also the question of whether someone who enjoyed so much imperial favour as Xenophon would take part in an assassination plot of his benefactor. And Claudius bestowed favour upon not only Xenophon but also several members of his family.⁸⁴ The need for Xenophon's involvement in the plot is due to Tacitus' inclusion of a temporary recovery which is in accord with one of Suetonius' versions. This does not mean that it is more credible. A period of recovery before the onset of death was considered a sign of

⁸¹ Barrett (1996, 140-41) questions Locusta's ability given the result.

⁸² Townend (1960, 110) suggests that Cluvius Rufus passed on the version in which Halotus was the culprit while Pliny accuses Locusta.

⁸³ Suet. *Galba* 15.2 (*atque insuper Halotum procuratione amplissima ornavit*). It could be argued that Halotus' promotion under Galba exonerates him, given Galba's promotion under Claudius. Galba was not only an *amicus* of Claudius (Suet. *Galba* 7.1) but also thrice triumphal (Suet. *Galba* 7-8, Tac. *Hist.* 1.49, Dio 60.8.7). One would expect a loyalty on the part of Galba toward Claudius that would preclude such a promotion.

⁸⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 12.61.2 (*precibusque eius [Xenophon] dandum, ut omni tributo vacui in posterum Coi sacram et tantum dei ministram insulam colerent*). For Xenophon see *CIL* 6.8905 and Pliny *N.H.* 4.8, 29.1. Not only was Xenophon closely connected with Claudius but also his brother, Ti. Claudius Cleonymus and his uncle, Ti. Claudius Cleonymus.

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poisoning and so would be a natural inclusion in an account which accused Agrippina of poisoning.⁸⁵

This brings up one further point. The three major ancient sources and most of the minor ones agree that Agrippina poisoned Claudius. This element of the story goes back at least as far as Pliny the Elder who may very well have been the original source.⁸⁶ If this is the case, we need to be extremely cautious. All of the later versions could well stem from the polymath who was very hostile to Agrippina and so was disposed to believe any story which blackened her.

One final aspect to the story which strongly argues against a plot to poison Claudius is that Agrippina was obviously unprepared for Claudius' death.⁸⁷ Both Tacitus and Suetonius say that the announcement of the death was delayed so that matters could be arranged for Nero's accession.⁸⁸ Elaborate measures were taken to make it appear as

⁸⁵ Germanicus also had a short period of recovery before succumbing (Tac. *Ann.* 2.71.1; *Caesar paulisper ad spem erectus*). The concern regarding Claudius' becoming aware of his being slowly poisoned as well as the attention paid as to whether he spoke or not after suffering his first attack could well refer back to Germanicus' death. In his case, the slow poison supposedly used gave him ample opportunity to realize what was being done to him, identify his killer and even give a death speech.

⁸⁶ Scramuzza (1940, 93), Barrett (1996, 140). The first surviving accusation of Agrippina appears in *Octavia*, datable to just after 68. Pliny's *Natural History* was published less than ten years later in 77. Bagnani suggests that Seneca was the ultimate source of the accusation against Agrippina. The source may even have been Agrippina the Younger herself who, according to Tacitus (*Ann.* 13.14) had no qualms about advertising that Nero was *princeps* "per iniurias matris" and "suum veneficium." These 'confessions' of Agrippina may even have appeared in her memoirs written, according to Wilkes (1972, 181), who follows Furneaux, between 54 and 59. Her motives within the narrative to undermine Nero's position compel a certain amount of skepticism. We also need to take Tacitus' motives into account. Such an assertion by Agrippina provides the psychologically satisfying confession by the 'guilty' party and re-inforces Tacitus' belief that Nero is not the proper emperor in the face of Britannicus, the natural son. See O'Gorman (2000, 106-07) on senatorial history as focussing on the 'discarded rivals'.

⁸⁷ Barrett (1996, 98) says that the delay does not accord with a pre-meditated murder.

⁸⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 12.68.1 (*cum iam exanimis vestibus et fomentis obtegeretur, dum quae res ferret firmando Neronis imperio componuntur . . . cunctis aditus custodies clauserat, crebroque vulgabat ire in melius valetudinem principis, quo miles bona in spe ageret tempusque prosperum ex monitis Chaldaeorum adventaret*), Suet. *Claud.* 45 (*mors eius celata est, donec circa successorem omnia ordinarentur . . . tempusque prosperum ex monitis Chaldaeorum adventaret*). Senec (*Apoc.* 3.2) also makes reference to what was obviously a contemporary prediction of Claudius' death. Pack (1943, 150) believes that consideration should be given to the reasons for delay offered by Tacitus and Suetonius. The announcement of Augustus' death was also said to have been delayed. Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.5) claims Livia was responsible for this deception in order to prepare things for a smooth succession whereas Suetonius

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though Claudius were still alive. The senate made vows for the emperor's safety. Tacitus says that Claudius' body was kept warm, access to the emperor was cut off by pickets and periodic announcements were made on Claudius' purported condition. Suetonius claims that the call for comedians, referred to in the *Apocolocyntosis*, was a ruse to give the impression that Claudius was still alive. All of this was to allow for arrangements which Suetonius does not detail at all and which Tacitus describes only as the preparation of the Praetorian Guard.⁸⁹ The problem is that these preparations were not entirely effective. Even with the guard prepared and Burrus cueing them, there were still some praetorians who looked for Britannicus, showing that any arrangements were incomplete.⁹⁰ This suggests that Agrippina was not prepared in advance to make arrangements for Nero's accession which she certainly would have had she murdered Claudius.⁹¹

The fact that Agrippina felt compelled to keep Britannicus, Octavia and Antonia out of sight until Nero's accession was confirmed is also significant.⁹² Agrippina's actions suggest that she perceived the natural offspring as a threat, a focal point around which any opposition to Nero might rally. Any delay in the announcement of Claudius'

(*Tib.* 22) lays this delay at Tiberius' feet whose reason was to first accomplish the execution of Agrippa Postumus. Suetonius makes no mention of a such delay in his life of Augustus.

⁸⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.69.1 (*comitante Burro Nero egrditur ad cohortem, quae more militiae excubiis adest. Ibi monente praefecto faustis vocibus exceptus inditur lecticae*).

⁹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 12.69.2 (*respectantis rogitantisque ubi Britannicus esset*).

⁹¹ The other reason offered for the delay in announcing Claudius' death is that an auspicious moment was being selected. Tac. *Ann.* 12.68.3 (*tempusque prosperum ex monitis Chaldaeorum adventaret*); Suet. *Nero* 8.1 (*cum ob totius diei diritatem non aliud auspicandi tempus accommodatius videretur*). This is supposedly referred to in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* 1.3 (*initium saeculi felicissimi*). See Pack (1943, 150-51) and Barrett (1996, 142). Given the large number of predictions which circulated regarding Claudius' death, it is difficult to imagine that any one of them would have been given such predominance without there being more practical considerations.

⁹² Tac. *Ann.* 12.68.2 (*iam primum Agrippina, velut dolore evicta et solacia conquirens, tenere amplexu Britannicum, . . . variis artibus demorari, ne cubiculo egrederetur. Antoniam quoque et Octaviam sorores eius attinuit*).

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death and accession of Nero would only provide such an opposition a window of opportunity and it could be argued that only a small window would suffice. The accession of Claudius only took a few hours to start and a day to complete.⁹³ Had Agrippina known in advance of Claudius' death, as a murderer would have, she surely would have ensured that arrangements were made before Claudius breathed his last. In the event she had to occupy herself with keeping the natural children out of the way, especially Britannicus.⁹⁴

Two naturally poisonous mushrooms have been suggested as being the culprits in Claudius' death. *Amanita Phalloides*, more commonly known as Death Cap, was first suggested in 1960 by Robert Graves and most recently supported by Grimm-Samuel.⁹⁵ This species of mushroom has, as part of its pathology, a recovery period seems to fit with the recovery Claudius enjoyed as described by both Suetonius and Tacitus. The difficulty is that amanite poisoning takes much longer than a single day to have its terminal effect. Grimm-Samuel says that the time between ingestion and death can be three to ten days. Eight to twenty-four after ingestion of the toxin, a person suffers vomiting and diarrhea for one to two days. This is followed by a twelve to twenty-four period when the person shows improvement. The symptoms of liver and kidney damage then set in and the person soon dies.⁹⁶ The difficulty is that this does not match the course of Claudius' death, as Barrett points out.⁹⁷ He notes that such a long latent period

⁹³ Admittedly Claudius' accession was in the face of a power vacuum, after the murder of Caligula whereas Nero was well established as the heir apparent.

⁹⁴ One could well question why Nero's wife would be kept in the background, since she should be considered an asset to Nero's accession rather than a complication.

⁹⁵ Graves (1960). Grimm-Samuel (1991, 178-82).

⁹⁶ http://www.vetpharm.unizh.ch/giftdb/pflanzen/0006_vet.htm; consulted 3/14/01.

⁹⁷ Barrett (1996, 288 n.164) discusses the scholarship on *amanita phalloides* as the possible mushroom which poisoned Claudius. The main difficulty is the long latent period between ingestion and the first symptoms. Grimm-Samuel fits the long pathology into the account by suggesting that Claudius was

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means that Claudius must have eaten the poisoned mushroom during a snack some time before the banquet of October 12 at which time he must have eaten mushrooms yet again. This is not such a great co-incidence given that Claudius' favourite food was mushrooms. What is a greater difficulty is that *amanita phalloides* are extremely toxic, a single mushroom is lethal. As noted the initial latent period can be as long as twenty-four hours and this would probably have been the case with Claudius. He would thus have eaten the lethal mushroom during dinner the previous day and it would have been a most extraordinary co-incidence for him to be the only victim. One would have expected a scene like the one in which Serenus and his dining companions were all killed.

There is, however, a better suggestion which has been offered and which does not require the same ingenuity. Valente has recently diagnosed Claudius with dystonia and identified a mushroom, *amanita muscaria*, as the likely culprit.⁹⁸ This mushroom does not contain sufficient amounts of the toxin, muscarine, to be fatal in normal circumstances, but Dr. Valente suggests that a previous medical condition such as dystonia could amplify the effects of muscarine to the point that it could be fatal.⁹⁹ This explains why only Claudius was affected by the mushrooms since only he was medically sensitive to the toxin they contained.

To sum up. None of the arguments used to support the theory that Claudius was murdered are able to stand up to close scrutiny. Agrippina had no motive to kill Claudius and it can even be argued that it was in her and Nero's best interest that Claudius live a

actually ill for a number of days and that this has been compressed into a single day. Given Claudius' age and metabolism, made sluggish by his lifestyle, we should expect that the toxin would take longer than average to work its way through his system.

⁹⁸ Bagnani (1946, 18) notes *amanita muscaria* as a possible naturally poisonous mushroom but discounts it as not matching the symptoms Claudius suffered.

⁹⁹ Valente (2002, 396) his final diagnosis is "acquired (secondary) dystonia, probably congenital, and acute (fatal) cholinergic mushroom poisoning complicated by either dystonic crisis or pulmonary aspiration."

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few years longer until Nero take up the consulship and earn some military experience. There was no chance that Britannicus would be considered as a potential successor and so Nero's position was unassailable. All other attendant circumstances also argue against murder. On the other hand, a mushroom has been proposed which is only fatal to someone with a pre-existing medical condition such as Claudius is suggested to have had.

On October 12, 54 at a dinner party at his home a dish of *amanita muscarina* were served. Although a number of people ate them, only Claudius, suffering as he did from dystonia, was made seriously ill. During the night Claudius died, but the announcement of his death was delayed until at least some arrangements, not previously prepared, could be made for Nero's accession.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ It is interesting to note that no one has thought to question Claudius' recovery during the night. It is highly probable that this recovery was part of the regular announcements made by Agrippina to help maintain the fiction that Claudius was still alive and fighting his illness.

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