Seduction and Power

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Antiquity in the Visual and Performing Arts

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Constantia Memoriae: The Reputation of Agrippina the Younger[1]

Mary R. McHugh

The historian and moralist Lord Acton famously said: 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.' If we are persuaded by conventional – that is to say, in most cases patriarchal – rhetoric, then we may easily adduce any number of women as closely analogous examples. From such a perspective, an attractive, intelligent and ambitious woman is quickly regarded as power-hungry and manipulative and, as a result, is turned almost unavoidably into an enchanting if devious seductress, ruthless in her desire for power either on her own or her children's behalf. Even worse, she exploits the emotional and moral failings of men. Great women are almost always bad women. Or so misogynistic gossip has persuaded many over millennia. Even historical sources are rarely free from such stereotypical views of women.

The film adaptation of John LeCarré's novel *The Constant Gardener* is a recent example, in a popular medium, of a particular classical rhetorical strategy. Slanderous attacks on the female protagonist, Tessa, mask a deadly conspiracy, one which she had sought to thwart. The strategy employed by her enemies has a long tradition: it was one of the rhetorical *topoi* used to influence the posthumous memory of women in ancient Rome. Cicero's use of hostile stereotypes of Roman women in forensic oratory, such as his attack on Clodia in the *Pro Caelio*, suggests that such negative portrayals became the basis of later defamatory descriptions.

The posthumous reputation of Agrippina the Younger may be the most instructive case. Even long after her death, hostile authors delighted in reporting her numerous affairs, including incestuous relationships with her brother Caligula, her uncle Claudius – whom she seduced into marriage – and even her

son Nero. She is also reputed to have been ruthless in exercising her influence to get rid of her enemies and was blamed for numerous deaths and persecutions. In sources hostile to the Julio-Claudian dynasty, Agrippina's political acumen and her alleged influence on both her husband's and her son's policy garnered her the reputation of being devious and manipulative. In the imperial world of courtly intrigue, power plays and back-door politics that historians like Tacitus and Suetonius describe, what could be a more effective strategy than a posthumous smear campaign? The *mala memoria*, as we might term it, of a supposedly bad woman has proven so tenacious as to be practically irreversible and irresistible even in a variety of media in modern times – an enduring constant of her reputation (despite several attempts in antiquity to rehabilitate her character).

Ancient Agrippina (Figure 33)

Who was Agrippina the Younger? Most importantly, she was a direct descendant of the emperor Augustus. Her parents, Agrippina the Elder and Germanicus,

Figure 33. Statue of Agrippina the Younger, detail. Vatican Museums.

were popular with the Roman people, and many assumed they were victims of the unpopular emperor Tiberius. In AD 33, the same year Agrippina the Elder died in exile imposed by Tiberius, Tiberius himself died. Agrippina the Younger's brother, Caligula, became emperor.

In AD 41, Caligula was assassinated, and Agrippina's uncle Claudius became emperor. After the death of her second husband, Agrippina married her uncle in AD 49. Claudius adopted Nero, her son from her first marriage, in the following year. The historian Cassius Dio claims that Agrippina controlled her husband through a mixture of intimidation and bribery.[2] Her ability to gain approval and consensus through the cultivation of useful friends in high places demonstrates her political acumen. For example, she was able to persuade Claudius' freedmen, whom he trusted more than anyone else, to convince him of the wisdom of her own advice. However, historians such as Tacitus and Dio criticize Agrippina's political skills as devious and manipulative since societal pressures forbade her open pursuit of power. As aristocratic women before her had done, Agrippina exercised her influence through her knowledge of political networks and personal contacts. Dio alleges that Agrippina manipulated all sectors of society and even that she held more power than Claudius.[3] Tacitus' remarks on Agrippina's influence, too, are hardly complimentary:

> everything was obedient to a woman who was playing fast and loose with the Roman commonwealth, but in a manner unlike [Claudius' third wife] Messalina, who had done so on the spur of her whims. It was a tightly controlled enslavement, as if to a man; in public there was sternness and, quite often, arrogance. There was no indecent behavior at home unless it advanced her despotic power. A boundless desire for wealth was kept hidden under the pretext that it was being accumulated as support of imperial authority.[4]

When the emperor Claudius died, allegedly poisoned by Agrippina, the barely seventeen-year-old Nero was acclaimed as emperor by the praetorian guard, whose loyalty Agrippina had been careful to secure. Suetonius and Dio allege that the young Nero left all public and private matters in the hands of his mother, even going so far as to imply that Agrippina acted as regent for her son.[5] Tacitus, however, records few specific details of direct political power exercised by Agrippina at the beginning of Nero's reign.[6] Suetonius reports that Nero soon tired of his mother's constant surveillance and criticism of his behaviour.[7] Things came to a head in AD 55 when Agrippina was accused of plotting a conspiracy against Nero. She eloquently defended herself and gained a pardon. Perhaps it was during the following years that she recorded her memoirs, wanting to leave

her own record of her remarkable life for posterity.[8] Agrippina's memoirs do not survive. We know they existed because Tacitus mentions that he used them as a source (though certainly not for his characterization of her).[9] Many of the honorific portraits granted her at Rome also do not survive intact, because of a *damnatio memoriae* declared by her son after he orchestrated her murder.[10]

A definition of the term '*damnatio memoriae*', of modern coinage, is in order. As Hedrick has noted, 'there was no juridical concept of *damnatio memoriae* in ancient Rome, only a more or less conventional repertoire of penalties for repressing the memory of a public enemy, which might be enacted separately or together'.[11] These sanctions did not negate historical traces, but created gestures to dishonour the record of the person and so to confirm the negative memory. There were many strategies available for attacking the posthumous memory of a public enemy (*hostis*). These include the defacement or the removal of the statues and busts of the person from public view; the erasure of the person's name from commemorative inscriptions; the confiscation of the person's property or the annulment of his will; the destruction of books authored by the *hostis*; the partial or total destruction of the house of the condemned; and a ban on the observance of funerals and mourning.[12] Any or all of these or similar penalties could be imposed, and these sanctions could be initiated by the emperor, the senate or even the army.[13]

Even though Agrippina was one of Nero's victims, her reputation suffered doubly, because she was the mother of a monster, and because she had sought to remove all obstacles, at whatever cost, to manoeuvre him next into line to the throne. In the historians' accounts of her character, all written long after her death, rhetorical strategy is linked with political motivation, for the character assassination of Agrippina is part of a strategy to further discredit her unpopular male relatives. It is a method of attacking the established principate and the Julio-Claudian dynasty long after it was toppled.

If we recite the accusations lodged by ancient historians against Agrippina the Younger, little more than a caricature emerges. Its outline is quite similar to the rhetorical strategy Cicero used to defame his enemies in the years before Augustus came to power. Cicero attacked the women associated with the men he hated as a way of discrediting the men.[14] The allegations Cicero employed are the same that ancient historians used to attack Agrippina.[15] Her sexuality is voracious – she is alleged to have had numerous affairs, including a number of incestuous relationships: with her brother Caligula, with her uncle Claudius before marriage, and even with her son Nero.[16] She was a poisoner (an occupation often associated with adultery), and she was extraordinarily cruel

and ruthless in eliminating her enemies.[17] She was unusually greedy for wealth, possessions and power, not only for her son but also herself, and would stop at nothing, including the use of her sexuality, to gain support.[18] In addition, she meddled in matters reserved for male authority.

In the case of Agrippina, the devastating appeal of negative characterization holds sharp focus and there is no reprieve. Despite later attempts to rehabilitate her memory (e.g. a colossal tondo portrait of Agrippina was discovered in Trajan's Forum, perhaps part of a Roman ancestral gallery), the most persistent record of Agrippina's reputation is that of Tacitus and other ancient historians, and theirs is a purely negative image.[19] For an illustrative modern case, even one that combines the visual and the verbal, I now turn to the 2005 film *The Constant Gardener*, adapted from John LeCarré's novel.

Le Carré's *The Constant Gardener*

The Constant Gardener very effectively uses rhetorical strategies to denounce a woman. From the start, through suggestion and innuendo, the film leads the viewer by visual clues and cues to suspect that a beautiful young wife, recently murdered, was guilty of adultery and that her husband had suspicions about her all along. This is a close modern analogy to what I want to establish in connection with Agrippina's posthumous reputation. First, however, here is the author's own plot summary of *The Constant Gardener*, recorded in an interview for the BBC documentary, *John LeCarré: The Secret Centre* (2000).

> LeCarré: We meet (the protagonist Justin Quayle), really as a kind of unawakened conformist, who has contracted a rather romantic marriage with a very young girl, who is outspoken, a young lawyer, Oxbridge, rich, and she is very zealous and idealistic. When they get to Africa, she peels off and gets into aid work, where she is happy, very happy. She gets pregnant, loses her baby, and that, in a sense, intensifies her sense of human responsibility, and she throws herself into the aid work, and comes upon very alarming secrets about the pharmaceutical world.
>
> Then we have Justin, after her death, picking up the trail and putting on her mantle, and it becomes, I suppose, a novel of education, as the Germans would say, a *Bildungsroman*, where he learns humanity on the hoof, of active, contributing humanity, constructive humanity, and an intense sense of her responsibility towards the wretched of the earth, who were Tessa's concern.

In the film, the camera acts in collusion with certain characters and so leads the viewer into an elaborately constructed fiction. In an early scene, Sandy Woodrow, the British High Commissioner in Kenya, arrives to tell Justin, a low-level diplomat, of the fact and circumstances of his wife Tessa's death:

> Justin: 'What is it, Sandy?'
> Sandy: 'Getting reports. A white woman, black driver. Found early this morning, southern end of Lake Turkana. Dead. Killed.'
> Justin: 'And you think it might be Tessa?'
> Sandy: 'It seems they hired a car and driver at Loki. Headed east. They spent the night at Lodwar. Shared a room. The black man isn't Arnold Bluhm.'
> Justin: 'But how sure are you?'
> Sandy: 'It isn't looking good.'

Sandy implies that Tessa may have been murdered by her black colleague, Dr Arnold Bluhm, after she shared a hotel room with another black man, who was found murdered next to Tessa. In the cultural milieu that Sandy's comments reflect, Tessa's indiscretions appear even worse, for to the traditional patriarchal white male, Tessa's sexuality is dangerous because out of control; it represents a threat to the established social order. Later, when Justin remembers his wife and tries to figure out what happened to her, we see, in a series of flashbacks, what appears to be very strong evidence condemning her. For example, in a later scene, Justin recalls reading an email Tessa received that seemed suspicious enough for him at the time to pretend to her that he hadn't read it:

> A message, 'New Mail/Would you like to read it now?' appears on the computer screen.
> Tessa: 'Could you see who it's from, darling?'
> Justin: 'Sure.' The email message: 'What were you and Arnold Bluhm doing in the Nairobi Hilton Sunday night? Does Justin know?'
> Tessa: 'Who is it?'
> Justin: 'What?'
> Tessa: 'The email.'
> Justin: 'Oh, it's umm, just some junk. Some ad.'
> Tessa: 'For?' Justin: 'For the Nairobi Hilton.' Justin erases the email.
> Justin: 'Weekend package deal. Two nights for the price of one.'

Tessa had become pregnant while in Africa. Rather than return to England, she decided to give birth in Kenya, like the poor women whose care she fiercely advocated. The point of view shot in the following scene, as Sandy enters Tessa's hospital room, sets up a false impression for the viewer. We first see her nursing

a black baby and then Arnold Bluhm and Tessa on screen together. Only after this does the camera shift to include Justin, looking somewhat uncomfortable, also at Tessa's bedside.

The camera focuses on the journey of a gift basket as its bearer enters the hospital from the parking lot and walks down the corridor, registering the hospital surroundings. The next shot is a tight close-up of a black baby nursing at a white breast. Then we see Tessa, propped up in a hospital bed. She is looking down at the tiny black baby nursing at her breast. The camera shifts to Tessa's right, where Arnold Bluhm sits beside the bed, clearly doting on the two. Tessa turns and glances at Bluhm. He, smiling, nods and blinks approvingly at her. Tessa gazes down at the baby, who is making happy, gurgling, contented noises as he nurses. Tessa then looks up, to her left, where Justin sits beside the bed. An expression flits across his face, perhaps one of sadness or even embarrassment. The camera reveals the identity of the gift-basket bearer. It is Sandy Woodward. The next scene is what Sandy encounters when he enters Tessa's hospital room: Arnold Bluhm to the left of the bed, Tessa lying in the bed, completely absorbed by the baby in her arms, and Justin to the right of the bed. The gaze of all three men is directed at Tessa and the child. Sandy walks into the frame from the left and balances the gift basket on the metal rail at the foot of the bed. All look up at Sandy.

> Tessa: 'Hello, Sandy.'
> Sandy: 'So sorry, Tessa. Gloria sends her sympathies. What can we say?'
> Tessa: 'It was a boy.' A sob creeps into her voice as she turns to look at Justin.
> 'Did Justin already tell you that …' Justin interrupts, comforting her.
> Tessa: 'This one was born healthy, though, weren't you?'
> Tessa (the sob again in her voice): 'Beautiful, beautiful darling. His name is Baraka. It means "blessing".'
> Sandy: 'I don't quite see …'
> Tessa: '… where the mother is?' Tessa turns her head to the right, looking towards another room behind them. 'Her name is Wanza Kilulu.' The camera shifts to another white hospital bed and a frail black girl, her eyes closed. A young black boy, not quite a teenager, fans her. 'She's fifteen and she is dying.' The boy wipes the girl's forehead. 'Kioko is twelve. He walked forty kilometers just to keep the flies off his sister and her baby. Perhaps that was the blessing.'

Only after the initial set-up of seeing everything from Sandy's perspective do we learn the truth, which is not at all what the camera has suggested. If we focused solely on the opening of this scene, and on where the camera directs our gaze, we might believe the defamatory fiction – that Tessa's baby is not Justin's child

– rather than the reality of Tessa's generosity, for, having lost her own child, she is nursing a baby whose own mother is dying. Tessa herself is admirably blind to divisions based on race and status, and this is used against her, as her behaviour creates an easily misunderstood and exploitable image. Shortly after this incident at the hospital, we return to the innuendo that Tess was involved in an extramarital affair with her colleague Dr Bluhm. As Justin recalls in flashback, he had overheard a hushed conversation between the two:

> Tessa: 'It's an outrageous thing. It's almost as if … ' Bluhm tries to shush her as Justin emerges from the garden.
> Tessa: ' … it's, it's a marriage of convenience, and the only thing … ' Justin comes into focus as he walks up the stairs behind Tessa. He looks toward the two, alert to their conversation, but continues past them. Tessa: ' … it's going to produce is dead offspring.' Bluhm again tries to warn Tessa they are not alone. Tessa then turns, her hand over her mouth.
> Justin: 'I'm sorry to interrupt.' The camera shifts to take in Justin's perspective. Tessa's gaze quickly turns to the green and yellow box in Justin's hand and on it the word 'PEST …' Tessa looks up at Justin.
> Tessa: 'What the fuck is that?'

Tessa had spoken of a 'marriage of convenience,' an arrangement that could only lead to dead offspring. She speaks figuratively, but viewers are easily led to understand her literally. From his – and our – perspective, Tessa's comments to Bluhm will naturally refer to the union with Justin she now resents and to the child they have lost. But this is not the case, as we will find out later.

The director lures the audience into passing negative judgements on Tessa, using camera angles, point of view shots and first-person perspectives – especially Justin's flashbacks – to provide circumstantial evidence for the negative impression of her character. In the cinema, as usually in life, 'Seeing is believing.' This visual exercise of rhetoric turns the viewers into allies of the villains, Sandy Woodrow and Sir Bernard Pellegrin, senior members of the British diplomatic corps in Kenya, who have done their best to sully Tessa's reputation for their own sinister goals. In a meeting with Justin, Sandy continues to hint at Tessa's guilt. The crux, it appears, is that there is no evidence to prove Tessa innocent. Or is there? In fact, Sandy may be fishing – does Justin have evidence that exonerates his wife?

> Justin: 'Is that the official thinking, then, that Arnold killed Tessa?'
> Sandy: 'I'm afraid it's looking likely.'
> Justin: 'Do you think that he was her lover?'

Sandy: 'I'm afraid that's looking likely, too.'
Justin: 'What were they doing up at Lake Turkana?'
Sandy: 'Romantic setting … Sorry I have to say it, old chap.'
Justin: 'But why suspect Bluhm then? There may have been others. Other lovers. If she was unfaithful, why stop at Arnold?'
Sandy: 'I wouldn't listen to rumor. Unless you have evidence.'
Justin: 'Yes, evidence. That's always the problem.'
Sandy: 'Justin … ' shouting after him, as Justin gets out the car and walks away,' '… be a good chap and leave this to us. There are proper channels for these things!'

Never mind that important information is omitted, or revealed only significantly later, such as the fact that Bluhm was gay and thus unlikely to have been Tessa's jealous lover, and that he was found to have been murdered on the same day as Tessa. One might ask – why manufacture such an elaborate lie? Why besmirch someone's reputation to such an extent that she is virtually reduced to a caricature? The best answer may lie in the aphorism, 'Where there's smoke, there's fire.' But the phrase doesn't mean that because everyone's talking about something, that something must be true.[20] All the talk may just be a smokescreen, a cover for what's at the heart of the matter, which may bear no resemblance to what everyone is buzzing about. Something is going on, but it's up to the intelligent reader, listener, or viewer, to filter through the chatter. One needs to ask smart questions: who stands to lose or gain from such trash-talk? How can one disprove it? Or are people simply lured in by sensational tittle-tattle?

In fact, malicious gossip has salacious appeal, and few people question what they hear. Justin discovers that the character assassination of Tessa at the hands of British authorities is a cover-up. For Tessa had sought to expose an unscrupulous collusion between a British pharmaceutical company and the British government. When Justin discovers what Tessa knew, and that she was murdered because of her knowledge and willingness to go public with the information, he knows that his fate, too, is sealed. He goes to the place where Tessa's body had been found, but not before he sends to Tessa's cousin an important letter, a missing piece of evidence that Justin had discovered among his wife's belongings after her death. In a compelling scene, the image of Justin, waiting for his assassins, blends into a funeral eulogy for him delivered by Sir Bernard Pellegrin in London.

Pellegrin: 'Typical of his discretion, he would not have had us troubled; he would not have had us inconvenienced. 'Nothing in his life became him like the

> leaving of it.'[21] Pellegrin concludes his eulogy. Tessa's first cousin, Ham, succeeds him at the lectern.
>
> Ham: 'I have chosen a text I know Justin and Tessa would approve. It's an epistle, non-canonical. 'My dear Sandy' … Pellegrin is visibly startled … 'your naïveté is beyond belief. Knowing our arrangements with KDH and ThreeBees, you send me this half-baked report by some bleeding heart diplomatic wife and her black lover, and ask me to take action.' The mourners in the audience begin to look at one another in disbelief. 'The only action required apart from shredding the thing is to keep a tighter rein on your resident harlot.' Pellegrin's mouth is making spluttering motions as he glances nervously around him. 'I want to know what she does, where she goes … ' More spluttering and facial contortions, even a snarl, from Pellegrin ' … whom she meets. The issue here is deniability. If nobody told us Dypraxa was causing death, we can't be held responsible.' Pellegrin storms out of the cathedral. 'But my dear Sandy, should it ever become known … ' Cameras flash as reporters surge forward, framing the hasty exit of Pellegrin. ' … that we closed our eyes to the deaths, none of us would ever survive the scandal. I still have great hopes for you. My love to Gloria. Yours Sincerely, Bernard." The reporters pursue Pellegrin to his car, slowing his escape. The camera then shifts back to the speaker inside the cathedral. 'Bizarre sort of suicide. His body bore no fewer than eight bullet wounds from three different guns, none of which was the one found in his hand. So who has got away with murder? Not, of course, the British government … They merely covered up, as one does, the offensive corpses.'

All this makes for a compelling story, especially when the character (and literal) assassinations of Tessa and Justin are unraveled to the viewer. Those of you who are familiar with ancient oratory will immediately recognize this rhetorical strategy of apparently clear guilt by innuendo or by subjective presentation of what appears to be conclusive evidence.[22] For others, these examples from *The Constant Gardener* will help you to appreciate the strategies at work in ancient and modern reports on the memory of Agrippina the Younger, my central theme.

Nachleben

Agrippina has been the subject of a variety of forms of art and entertainment over the centuries. In the history of Agrippina's reputation, we find a wide range of media and genres, from the early modern high culture of opera to the popular medium of cinema. Two films are noteworthy examples of this: the Italian

comedy *Mio figlio Nerone* (1956), in which she is played by Gloria Swanson, by then indelibly identified with the character she had played in Sunset Boulevard, and the infamous *Caligula* (1979), in which she is reincarnated by a Penthouse Pet and engages in lesbian sex. The Berlin Staatsoper's production of Handel's opera *Agrippina* in 2010, too, illustrates the tenacity of the characterization of Agrippina as overbearing and manipulative, even in high culture.

The Italian *Mio Figlio Nerone* (1956) is a farcical comedy, although it follows Tacitus' account quite closely. The actress cast as Agrippina is none other than Gloria Swanson, whose persona was by then indelibly linked with her legendary performance as an aging *femme fatale* in *Sunset Boulevard*. This association no doubt enhanced her role as the controlling mother of Nero in the film. From the start there are clear references to Tacitus – indeed, his name and the title of his histories, the *Annals*, are shown at the beginning. The plot of the film appears to come straight from the pages of that source. Early on, Agrippina explains to her son Nero that no one in their family has died of natural causes in the last 50 years. He replies that he saw her prepare the deadly little mushrooms (*funghi*) for Claudius with her own hands.

Even though true to the spirit of the Roman historian, farcical elements in the movie's plot expand the characterization of mother and son. In one scene, Agrippina retrieves several snakes from her handbag (of all places!) and Nero, at first cringing in childish and farcically exaggerated terror, affects the role of Hercules, taking up a club in defence. This, too, is somewhat true to Tacitus' account. Apparently Nero liked to tell the story that a snake had been seen by his cradle when he was an infant, an omen of his future greatness.[23] Snakes were commonly among the accoutrements of poisoners, and Agrippina is a little too comfortable in handling them. The farce devolves further as mother and son engage in mutual attempts to poison one another – 'Like mother, like son'. Tacitus alleges that Nero's poisoning of his rival, Brittanicus, at a banquet, in full view of the guests, frightened Agrippina, who now realized that Nero was probably capable of matricide as well.[24]

Despite her social status, Agrippina became increasingly isolated, for Nero avoided private meetings with her, and many of her former friends deserted her. Tacitus reports that when a devious Nero invited his mother to a party, they shared an evening which hinted at reconciliation between mother and son. After great displays of affection, Nero sent her home on a boat specially engineered to collapse in mid-voyage, hoping that his mother would drown in what appeared to have been an unfortunate accident. Agrippina realized her son's murderous intent; however, when in the chaos of the shipwreck her loyal

friend Acerronia loudly announced that *she* was Agrippina, the woman was promptly killed. Agrippina swam to shore, returned home, and waited for her assassins to arrive.

Unlike in Tacitus, Agrippina in *Mio Figlio Nerone* confronts her son about his attempts to assassinate her. She reports that the ceiling of her bed (standing in for the sinking boat in the historian's account) has collapsed (here a '*mattress*-cide' certainly engineered by her son), it crushed her dear friend Crepereius, although she was accidentally spared. Nero's attempts to serve up poisoned beverages to Agrippina have also failed. She reveals that she has been taking antidotes from an early age and is now immune to poison. As is to be expected in this kind of plot, Nero comes across as a completely incompetent buffoon and Agrippina as a clever, domineering mother. We laugh at the comic absurdity of it all, a dysfunctional family drama – the stuff of Greek and Roman tragedy turned on its head. The film ends with Rome burning, and Nero alone with busts of Seneca, Poppaea and Agrippina, all killed by him (Figure 34). These three were the most important people in his life, yet his infantile preoccupation with his mother ranks her in importance above the others. Perhaps, as Tacitus' account suggests, there was something Oedipal or even incestuous in Nero's fascination with Agrippina.[25]

Speaking of incest and other perversions, one cannot avoid mention of the notorious editor of *Penthouse Magazine*, Bob Guccione, and his 1979 film, *Caligula*.[26] Here, unfortunately, we reach a nadir: hardcore pornography amid an orgy of graphic violence. Despite an illustrious cast, an early script written by Gore Vidal, and the protestations of Guccione that his production was

Figure 34. A screenshot of Alberto Sordi as Nero with portrait busts of Seneca, Poppaea and Agrippina, *Mio Figlio Nerone* (1956).

sophisticated, high art, and represented ancient Rome 'as it truly was', the film was, and is, unwatchable.

One of the many scenes of explicit sex which made *Caligula* infamous is that in which Messalina, the notorious third wife of the emperor Claudius, played by a Penthouse Pet, engages in lesbian sex with Agrippina, Claudius' fourth wife, another Penthouse Pet. Although the characters these women play are never named in the film, they are members of the imperial household and appear in several scenes. Their identification occurs in a special edition of *Penthouse* that featured the film and in published cast lists. Both women are also participants in a scene of graphic sadism in which they torture a young man to death. In Guccione's *Caligula*, Agrippina and Messalina are implicated in what, to the male gaze, are extremes of sex and violence, that is, here, lesbianism and sadism.

At the time the film was released, explicit lesbian sex on film was highly unusual and shocking in what purported to be nearly main-stream filmmaking. Just as Tessa's detractors in *The Constant Gardener* insinuate that she and her sexuality are out of control, the portrayal of Agrippina's sexuality in Guccione's film reaches a nadir of excess not even found in the hostile ancient sources. Now from the outrageously disgusting to the outrageously chic. The 2010 performance of Handel's *Agrippina* at the Berlin Staatsoper is the most recent modern example of the celebration of Agrippina's poor reputation. *Agrippina* was George Friederich Handel's first great operatic masterpiece, written in Venice for the 1709/1710 Carnevale season. It is best described as an anti–heroic, satiric comedy with political allusions. Apart from the future emperor Otho, there are no morally grounded characters. Everyone is scheming and plotting, pitting people against one another for personal profit and advantage, and no one surpasses Agrippina in this regard.[27]

Handel's librettist was Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani. The cleric was trained as a classicist, and many have read his criticism of Pope Clement XI as central to his loose but creative adaptation of history. The opera met with overwhelming acclaim in Venice and played to packed audiences for a then unprecedented 27 performances. However, after this quite successful season, Handel did not promote further productions of *Agrippina*. In the mid-eighteenth century, Handel's music declined in popularity, and it was not until the twentieth century that an interest in Baroque music led to a Handel revival and to regular performances of his operas. In 2010, the 300th anniversary of the first production of the opera, there were numerous productions of Handel's *Agrippina* worldwide.

The Berlin Staatsoper's production of Handel's *Agrippina* opened in February 2010, and, like the first performance of the opera, immediately met with critical

acclaim. The costume designer was none other than Christian LaCroix, the French *haute couture* fashion designer. The staging of the production highlights the political dimensions of the libretto. For example, Emperor Claudius is costumed in a way that undoubtedly refers to Grimani's satirical criticism of Pope Clement XI.[28] Agrippina is not only a clever and devious strategist in orchestrating her vapid son's rise to the throne, but she also plays up to the ancient stereotype of being extraordinarily cruel (Figure 35) here shown abusing one of the freedmen, Narcissus, on whom the emperor Claudius relied as one of his closest allies in a court rife with intrigue. Tacitus claims that Agrippina's abuse of Narcissus led him to commit suicide.[29] There are moments, too, when the depiction of Agrippina appears to rely on modern stereotypes, similar to what Gloria Swanson's role in *Sunset Boulevard* brings to her performance as Agrippina in *Mio Figlio Nerone*. For example, in one scene,

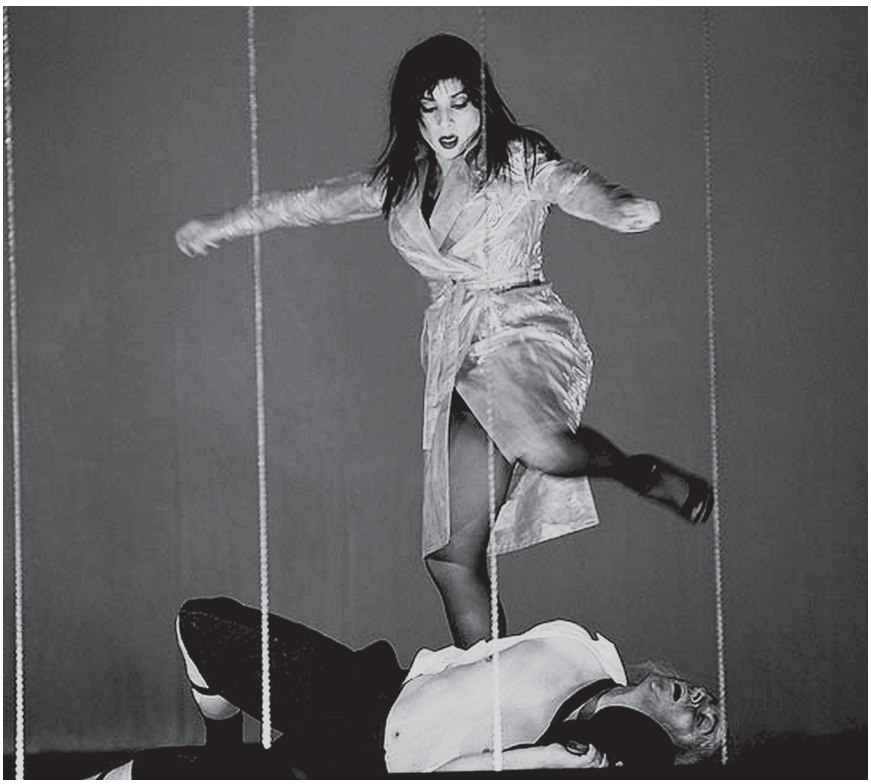

Figure 35. Photograph from the 2010 Berlin Staatsoper production of Handel's *Agrippina*. Alexandrina Pendatchanska plays Agrippina and Dominique Visse plays Narcissus. © Monika Ritterhaus.

Agrippina bears a striking resemblance to the famous opera singer Maria Callas, 'La Divina', the woman who defined what it meant to be a diva. For a modern audience, perhaps unfamiliar with the historical Agrippina, this analogy may enhance appreciation of Agrippina's character in the opera. In another scene, the staging makes clear that *she* is the dynamic force behind Nero's accession (Figure 36). Farce, pathos, comedy, delicious costuming, and political-historical references make this opera the crowning, and most recent cultural production of Agrippina's reputation. She is better suited to rule than her son, yet, as a woman, her ambitions can only be directed towards his success as a vicarious substitute for her own.

As we have seen, there is a whole cultural matrix surrounding the reputation of Agrippina. There is, however, yet more. Why is Le Carré's principal female character called Tessa? There may be no proof positive for this, but it is entirely possible that Le Carré had a famous woman from British literature with an almost identical name in mind – Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles. Tess

Figure 36. Photograph from the 2010 Berlin Staatsoper production of Handel's *Agrippina*. Alexandrina Pendatchanska plays Agrippina and Jennifer Rivera as Nero. © Monika Ritterhaus.

is an independent, strong-willed woman who goes to the gallows for a crime which represents female revolt against male authority. To the good citizens of Wessex County, Tess is a criminal to whom appropriate justice was meted out. That is her official reputation posthumously, as the novel's ending makes evident. But we, Hardy's readers, know better because we have come to know the real Tess. To us, she was a woman who loved, perhaps not wisely but too well.

From antiquity to today, as with Hardy's Tess and LeCarré's Tessa in fiction, so in history from Agrippina to – in more recent memory – First Lady Hilary Clinton, rhetorical strategies employed to defame or denigrate strong-willed women who encroach upon or otherwise threaten male power or profit structures and, as a result, become stigmatized for their irresistible, i.e. dangerous, sexuality, have not significantly changed. To put the case somewhat differently, 'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'. Agrippina would not have understood French, but she certainly would have understood the sentiment. Most likely, she would herself have thought of a suitable Roman saying: *semper aliquid haeret* – something always sticks.

Notes

1 I would like to thank the organizers of the *Imagines II* conference, Silke Knippschild and Marta Garcia Morcillo, for bringing to successful completion a terrific conference and this collection of works. I am indebted to both for their careful review and insightful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. Thanks are due to three earlier readers of this chapter (alphabetically) Marc Kleijwegt, Carole Newlands and Susan Treggiari, and last but certainly not least, Martin Winkler.

2 Dio 60.32.1–2.

3 Dio 60.32.2, 60.33.1.

4 *Ann*. 12.7.3, my translation.

5 Suet. *Nero* 9; Dio 61.3.1.

6 Barrett 1996: 150.

7 Suet. *Nero* 34.1.

8 Tac., *Ann*. 13.14.4; Paratore 1952: 42.

9 Tac., *Ann*. 2.69.1, 4.53.3; Dixon 2001: 142, 148.

10 The *Octavia*, a tragedy traditionally attributed to Seneca the Younger, reports sanctions against Agrippina's memory, *Octavia* 593–617. Tacitus notes what several sycophantic advisors of Nero tell him about the public reaction to Agrippina's murder: *invisum Agrippinae nomen et morte eius accensum populi favorem disserunt*

('they said that Agrippina's name was hated and (Nero's) popular favor had been inflamed by her death'). After some initial hesitation, Nero proceeds to Rome as if the victor in a triumphal procession, Tac. *Ann.* 14.13. An example of the erasure of Agrippina's name: *ILS* 226 (inscription 31). Barrett describes the sanctions against Agrippina's memory, although he does not believe the senate declared a formal *damnatio memoriae*, Barrett 1996: 192–3. Eck, however, argues for an official *damnatio memoriae*, Eck 1993: 88, n. 196. Cf. also Varner 1993: 197 and Varner 2004: 97–100.

11 Hedrick 2000: 93; Varner 2001: 41.

12 Hedrick 2000: 93; Varner 2001: 41. I describe in greater detail the practices of *damnatio memoriae* in my doctoral dissertation, Hugh, *Manipulating Memory: Remembering and Defaming Julio-Claudian Women*, McHugh 2004: 9–11.

13 Hedrick 2000: 93; Varner 2001: 41.

14 Kennedy 1972: 271.

15 Dixon 2001: 140–53; see also Cluett 1998: 81–2.

16 Caligula: Suet. *Ca.* 24.1–3; Dio 59.22.6, 59.26.5; Claudius: Suet. *Claud*. 26.3; Tac. *Ann*. 12.5.1; Dio 60.31.6; Nero: Tac. *Ann*. 14.2; Dio 61.11.3–4.

17 Susan Treggiari (*per sermones*): 'the usual idea is that an *adultera* (an adulteress) will become a *venefica* (poisoner).' Dio claims that after Agrippina's marriage to Claudius, she used murder for profit. Among the persecutions and murders attributed to Agrippina are Lollia Paulina (Tac., *Ann*. 12.22.1–4; Dio 60.32.3); Statilius Taurus – whose gardens Agrippina is alleged to have coveted (Tac. *Ann*. 12.59.1); Domitia Lepida (Tac. *Ann*. 12.64.4–6, 65.1–2); Marcus Silanus (Tac. *Ann*. 13.1.1; Dio 61.6.4); Narcissus (Tac. *Ann*. 13.1.4); Brittanicus (Dio 60.34.1–4).

18 Tac. *Ann*. 12.7–8, 12.42, 12.57, 12.59, 12.64, 13.19.

19 Wood (1999) 302–3.

20 Julian Baggini, author of *Should You Judge This Book by Its Cover?: 100 Fresh Takes on Familiar Sayings and Quotations*, interviewed on NPR Weekend Edition Sunday, 15 May 2010.

21 Sir Pellegrin quotes from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Act 1, scene 4, lines 7–8.

22 Kennedy (1972) 271.

23 *Ann*. 11.11.

24 *Ann*. 13.16.

25 Tac. *Ann*. 14.2; Dio 61.11.3–4.

26 Martin Lindner's chapter, also in this volume, details Caligula's reputation as one of the 'archetypical bad guys not only of ancient historiography but also of modern pop culture.' Lindner discusses Guccione's 1979 *Caligula* within this context.

27 Verdi's Abigaille in the opera *Nabucco*, although completely fictitious, is characterized as a power-hungry, evil seductress, much like the historians' Agrippina. Such a juxtaposition of actual and fictional figures reveals how similar

the purposes and strategies of defamation can be in historical accounts and fiction. For further discussion of Abigaille, cf. Michael Seymour's essay in this volume.

28 Opera appears to have been a popular vehicle for criticism of papal authority. Seymour (*this volume*) mentions Giovanni Battista Niccolini's opera *Nabucco* for its criticism of Pope Pius VII.

29 *Ann*. 13.1.