Article

Women's Ambition, Ambitious Women: The Case of Caesar's Household During The Julio-Claudian Era

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Abstract
Most scholarship on women and their position in antiquity generally agrees that women's status was largely low. Relatedly, in the ancient Republican Rome, women had no significant political, economic, legal and social rights. However, by the Imperial period, it appeared that the *status quo* was altered as many Roman women pursued tall ambitions such as desire for wealth, political power, fame, elegance, adornment and control of their families. Using the mistresses, wives, mothers, and daughters that were either married or related to first century Julio-Claudian Caesars as a case study, this paper examined women's struggle for ambition, dominance, and control of the Roman Empire. Approached chronologically through a method of content analysis of archival materials and the evidence provided by Roman writers such as Tacitus, Livy, Sallust, and Seneca, the paper highlighted some ambitious behaviours of selected women within the period 31B.C. – A.D.68. Rather than exude the virtues of true *matronae* (noble women) to advance their society, Caesars' women exhibited flagrant indiscipline, immorality, and wickedness in form of subtle naggings, conspiracies, promiscuity, prostitution, debaucheries, poisonings, and murders of relations in order to achieve their varied notorious ambitions. The paper concluded specifically that these women's drives ultimately contributed to the collapse of socio-political order under the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

Keywords
Women, ambition, Julio-Claudian dynasty, imperial Rome

Introduction

Before the ancient Roman imperial era began (31B.C. – A.D.476), Roman women were absolutely kept in the background. The renowned Roman historian, Livy, records that the women could '…not do anything, even private, without the approval of a guardian, and that they had to be under the control of their fathers, brothers and husbands' (Livy, 34.1.11). Livy also adds that

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Roman women 'could have no magistracies, priesthoods, triumphs, insignia, gifts and spoils of war' (34.7.8-9). Many other Roman writers (Gaius, *Institutes,* 1.144; Cicero, *Pro Murena,* 27; Seneca, *Controversiae,* 1.6.5; Valerius Maximus, 9.1.3) affirm that women were usually placed under the absolute control of their *paterfamilias* (head of household) or guardian before marriage; and as a married woman, she must be under the control of her husband or her husband's *paterfamilias* if he still had one. The man, as the case might be, had the powers of life and death over the woman – of death, subject to the approval of the council if she was found guilty of adultery or other heinous crime. Since women were often seen as creatures with lightness of mind (*levitas animi*) and weakness of judgment (*infirmitas consilii*), they had no significant political, economic, legal and social rights. As such, most Roman women could not overtly wield or sway much influence until the end of the Second Punic War (218 – 201 B.C), when their condition began to improve due to their acquisition of wealth, much of which were inherited from the estates of their late husbands who had fallen during the stirring times of the war (Polybius, 3.107-108; 31.26.1-5; Livy, 22.7.1-14; 22.56.4-5; 28.18.14; etc). Even then, it was not common for a woman to freely express her ambition for business or politics, a trend which lingered into many traditional societies until the recent decades when women's agitation for liberation became very prominent. Thus, it is amazing that before the Republican Rome collapsed, following the assassination of Julius Caesar (44 B.C.), many women began to exercise power and rival men by proxy either through their sons or husbands (Juvenal, *Satires,* VI. 252-254; Tacitus, *Annales,* 6.25; Seneca, *Epistulae,* 95.20-21). By the start of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (31B.C. – A.D.68), which ushered in the imperial period, the ambition of women, particularly the upper class and those related to the emperors, varied considerably, ranging from desire for wealth, political power, fame, elegance, adornment to the control of their families over their husbands.

Ambition is a strong desire to do or achieve something, or a strong desire and determination to achieve success (Soanes & Stevenson, 2004: 44). In many societies, both ancient and modern, ambition, for men, is a necessary and desirable part of life. But for most women, it is often associated with egotism, self-aggrandizement, arrogance, or manipulation. For the women in Caesar's (emperors') household during the Julio-Claudian period, ambition for relevance and control of the Roman Empire was a necessity and a desire of paramount importance, a phenomenon that ultimately disquieted the socio-political ethos of their society. Among the Romans, when candidates wanted to seek political offices, they had to do just what modern politicians do. They used varied subtle methods of statecraft for winning elections such as courting people's votes, shaking their hands long before elections, supplicating or canvassing their favour, as well as the immoral use of godfathers (patrons), bribery and violence (Linderski, 1985: 87-89; Lintott, 1990: 1-2). Today, the same corrupt methods of the ancient Romans are frequently deployed by politicians in forms of giving gifts and money to prospective electorates, using

physical violence to disrupt or rig votes, promising attractive policies, engaging the services of godfathers and political thugs and so on (Akinboye, 2017). These and other perverse means 'help' to manipulate, control, influence and subvert elections. The Latin word for this effort was *ambitus. Ambitus* refers to all methods of corrupt practices and longings for *honores*, or perverse pursuit of political office or fame (Linderski, 1985: 82). It denotes all unethical means of getting votes or political power. Although the word *ambitio* is synonymous with *ambitus*, it however, differs in the sense that it relates to an eager but *legal* quest for power. Thus, the English word 'ambition' is derived from Latin *ambitio*, not *ambitus*. Also the Latin word *ambitus* is connected to the verb *ambire,* which conveys the notion of 'going round', 'canvassing support' (Akinboye, 2017). Therefore, *ambitus* originally would mean going round, supplicating or canvassing for public office with the freedom for personal contact with prospective voters and by inference, with the deployment of all forms of bribery and other unethical intrigues. Since both *ambition* and *ambitus* allude to virtually the same activity of a **desire for honour or power**, the word eventually came to mean "the desire for honour or power." This word came into French and English as *ambition* in the late Middle Ages. Later, its meaning broadened to include "an admirable desire for advancement or improvement" and still later "the object of this desire" (Merriam Webster Dictionary, *https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ambition*). In what follows, therefore, this paper examines the various activities that constituted ambitions of selected women within the emperors' household and their rise into societal prominence. To investigate this, Tacitus is our main source of evidence. He is supplemented with the evidence of other important Roman writers such as Livy, Sallust, Seneca and other modern writers. The paper reveals that these women's high handedness and desires for power and honour ultimately led to the collapse of socio-political order under the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

The Julio-Claudian Dynasts

Following the victory of Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, (later called Augustus Caesar) over Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium in 31 B.C, peace was restored in Rome. Several years of civil wars and internal wrangling which had bedeviled the state finally subsided. Then Rome entered the Principate period, otherwise referred to as the Imperial age. The Imperial age started with the Julio-Claudian period (27 B.C. – A.D. 68) which was the era when Rome witnessed the reigns of Julius Caesar's immediate successors: Augustus Caesar (31B.C. - AD 14), Tiberius Caesar (A.D. 14 – 37), Gaius Caesar (Caligula) (A.D. 37 – 41), Claudius Caesar (A.D. 41 – 54) and Nero Caesar (A.D. 54 – 68). The emperors' of the Julio-Claudian dynasty were diverse in character. During their period, Rome, indeed, reached its pinnacle of

socio-political supremacy and economic prosperity, effectively controlling large population of peoples of various culture, colour and languages. It was the Golden Age of Roman literature and arts.

Ambitious Women of the Julio-Claudian Dynasts

In the *Annals,* Tacitus gives a detailed account of the ambition of some important women who were wives, mistresses or mothers of the dynasts of the Julio-Claudian era. For the purpose of this paper, the selected imperial women are: Livia Drusilla, later called Augusta, wife of Augustus; Agrippina the Elder, wife of Germanicus; Messalina, the third wife of Claudius; Agrippina the Younger, the fourth wife of Claudius; and Poppaea Sabina, wife of Nero. These women in the imperial era were a complex mix of characters. Authors such as Tacitus, Seneca and Horace presented them in a most ambitious light.

Some modern historians hold the view that these women by their traits were ultimately seeking to 'help' the Empire. Others believe that their actions were inappropriate in view of the traditional roles and habits which women were expected to exhibit in the society. Burns, for example, asserts that the women had more control in the Empire than many believed they had. This was due to the fact that the Empire was more liberal than the Republic. He also states that generally women were artistes, teachers, doctors and even gladiators in the Empire. Roman women in the Imperial period were independent in the sense that when they married, they did not change their names; their husbands did not control their property or dowry and they were free to divorce their husbands (Burns, 2007: 2). This historical information perhaps gives an insight into the reason for the distasteful character of most elite women of the Julio-Claudian society.

Specimen of Ambition of the Julio-Claudian Women

Women generally in history have shown ambition. Within the purview of Roman history alone, one can readily mention the case of Cleopatra (69 - 30 B.C), the queen of Egypt, who had affairs with both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. These were two of Rome's top generals, whom she induced with the aim to wield influence in Rome and simultaneously rule Egypt. At different times, she formed personal alliances with these men to confront their supposed enemies thereby creating situations which reflect her signs of intelligence and strategy rather than any weak emotion such as love (Tyldesley, 2008: 4-5). Cleopatra was ruthless in that she murdered her sister, Arsinoe IV, and her brother and co-ruler Ptolemy XIII (Tyldesley, 2008: 4-5). According to Burstein, Cleopatra played a prominent role in the war against Octavian in 31 B.C. She commanded the Egyptian fleet and took part in Antony's council of war (Burstein, 2004: 30).

Fulvia, the wife of Antony, was another example of an ambitious woman of the late Republican period. Fulvia was one who did not shy away from

taking decisions, thus she was at the forefront of the Perusine War (41 – 40 B.C.) alongside Lucius Antonius, brother of Mark Antony. This was in defiance against the instruction of Octavian (Augustus). Allison, reporting Plutarch and Cicero's observations, described her as a politically aggressive and dominating wife of Mark Antony (Allison, 2007). Velleius Paterculus, whom Dennision cited, also commented on Fulvia negatively by stating that there was nothing womanly about her except her anatomy (Dennison, 2010: 267).

Many women who were wives, mistresses or mothers of the dynasts or emperors of the Julio-Claudian era were no less ambitious than Cleopatra or Fulvia. When the Julio-Claudian period fully unfolded as from 27 B.C., its main initiator, Augustus, had married another wife, one Livia Drusilla, later known as Livia Julia Augusta after her adoption into the Julian family-line. Tacitus described her as having had an immense influence on Augustus. Livia (58 B.C. – A.D. 29), according to some historians, was her husband's adviser during his reign. In fact, it is held that she acted as regent several times. She was often portrayed in Roman history as a conniving and evil woman, who could do anything to achieve her goal. For instance, Livia eliminated her husband's other heirs by his first marriage through poisoning, in order to ensure that her son by her first marriage, Tiberius, became the next emperor (Tacitus, 1996: 34-35).

Livia, in order to bolster her reputation in the society, was also known to often condescend very low by interceding for offenders especially conspirators (Tacitus, 1996: 105). For instance, she interceded for Plancina, the wife of Cnaeus Calpurnius Piso, who was made governor of Syria by Tiberius and was believed to have poisoned Germanicus, husband of Agrippina the Elder. Tacitus states that Plancina had more influence than her husband since Livia Augusta's private appeals secured her pardon (Tacitus, 1996: 125). Tacitus again gives another instance where one of Livia's associates, Urgulania, was summoned to the court by the magistrate, Lucuis Piso, but she refused to attend based on her friendship with Livia. Rather, she rather drove to the palace to complain to the Augusta. Urgulania's influence, according to Tacitus, remained excessive after this incident, because when she was again summoned to the Senate as a witness in another case, she again refused to attend (Tacitus, 1996: 93).

Because the power and influence of Livia was overwhelming, many women who associated with her were protected from the intimidations of men and of the state. It is therefore no surprise that her portrayal in history is that of a woman who had negative or harmful influence over her husband and the Caesar's household. Her grandson, Gaius Caesar, was said to have referred to her as '*Ulixes stolatus*' (Odysseus in a matron's gown) to indicate her deceit of people (Simon Hornblower & Spawforth, 1998: 423; Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars: Caligula*, 22). She was believed to have been involved

in the deaths of Marcus Claudius, Marcellus, Gaius Caesar, Lucius Caesar, Agrippa Posthumus and Germanicus as well as Augustus himself. The deaths of these Augustus' possible successors, in different circumstances and at different age, were all too strange (Simon Hornblower & Spawforth, 1998: 423). Thus, stories about her manipulation of the affairs of Augustus' household to benefit her son, Tiberius, will continue to echo in the Roman history. On her death, she was still honoured by the people 'because she has saved the lives of many senators, brought up the children of many, and helped many to pay their daughters' dowries'(Dio Cassius, 55.2.5; 56. 10). Coins struck in her honour, and indeed for her flattery bore inscriptions such *Salus Augusta* (Augusta the Saviour)*, Pietas Augusta* (Augusta the Dutiful) and *Genetrix Orbis* (Mother of the World) (Rutland, 1978: 22).

Vipsania Agrippina, popularly known as Agrippina the Elder or Agrippina the Major (14 B.C.–A.D. 33), was another renowned woman of Caesar's household whose ambitious streak for her children knew no bounds. She was the daughter of Julia (Augustus' only biological daughter) and Marcus Agrippa; she married Germanicus in 5 B.C and had nine children including Nero Julius Caesar, Drusus III Julius Caesar, Gaius (who later became Emperor Caligula), Drusilla, Agrippina the Younger (who was the future mother of Emperor Nero) and Julia Livilla. As the daughter of Augustus, two of two brothers were named as the future heirs of the Roman Empire. Following the untimely deaths of the two brothers, Livia had ensured the enthronement of her son, Tiberius. Germanicus, Agrippina's husband, who was also named a future heir, died of a mysterious illness. This raised some suspicion and Agrippina alleged that Tiberius poisoned her husband. Consequently, Tiberius and Agrippina became arch enemies.

As an heiress, who was openly ambitious to have any of her children in the position of emperor, Agrippina was always aloof and ever finding ways to undermine Tiberius, particularly through her own supporters. Eventually, the Emperor sent her and two of her eldest sons, Nero Caesar and Drusus Caesar, into exile in A.D 29. Tacitus, though might be biased, describes her as one who was very proud especially about the fact that she was the only living descendant or grand-daughter of Augustus. He recounts how Germanicus, on his dying bed, made a plea to Agrippina to forget her pride, submit to cruel fortune and avoid provoking those stronger than her by competing for power in Rome (Tacitus, 1996: 113). But Agrippina was unperturbed. Her main desire, after husband's death, was vengeance against Tiberius and assertion of herself in Rome was the only way to achieve this (Tacitus, 1996: 114). Tacitus therefore likened the conflict between Tiberius and Agrippina to convulsions which shook the imperial household. For instance, in her bid to align with Agrippina, Claudia Pulchra, who was the second cousin of Agrippina, was put on trial for: adultery with Furnius, attempting to poison the emperor and performing magic spells against him (Tacitus, 1996: 183). Thus, this conflict set the stage for a chain of events for Tiberius, who, through Agrippina's ambitious nature, was able to eliminate potential successors to the throne.

Described as violent by Tacitus, Agrippina was not enthused about the situation in which her relative, Pulchra, found herself. She confronted Tiberius. She found him sacrificing to his adoptive father, Augustus, and used this scene to launch her complaints. She said to Tiberius: 'The man, who offers victims to the deified Augustus, ought not to persecute his descendants. It is not in mute statues that Augustus' divine spirit has lodged – I, born of his sacred blood, am its incarnation! I see my danger; and I wear mourning. Claudia Pulchra is an idle pretext. Her downfall, poor fool, is because she chooses Agrippina as friend! She forgot Sosia Galla – who suffered for just that' (Tacitus, 1996: 183-184). Tiberius, who was usually tacit, was provoked into making one of his infrequent Greek pronouncements: '*it was not an injury that she did not reign'*.

One crisis which rocked the Julio-Claudian dynasty as it neared its end was the corruption of Valeria Messalina (A.D. 17/20 - 48), the third wife of Emperor Claudius and Agrippina the Younger (daughter of Agrippina the Elder and niece to Claudius). On the one hand, Agrippina the Younger (who later became the fourth wife of Claudius) had wanted to marry Claudius in order to actualize her ambition of making her son, Nero, the next Emperor. On the other hand, Messalina proved to be a very ambitious, licentious and ruthless woman. Perhaps noting that hers was a radical departure from the ethos of the traditional Roman woman who must be chaste and pure, Tacitus describes her as powerful and at the same time, very promiscuous (Tacitus, 1996: 244-251). Moreover, Messalina had come from an arrogant house and from a class whose moral standards were traditionally not strict. Salmon describes her as a monster of cruelty and sexual depravity (Salmon, 1968: 171). He also believes that her marriage to Claudius, a man who was thirty-two years older when she was barely fifteen years of age, greatly affected her. Her husband could certainly not match her sexual strength. As such, she had many secret lovers. In the opinion of Salmon, therefore, Messalina could not control her passions. In A.D. 48, Messalina, in her ambition and greed, threw all decency to the wind when she made an attempt to make herself empress and her lover, Gaius Silius, the emperor. She conspired with him to overthrow Emperor Claudius; unfortunately, she met her untimely death (Tacitus, 1996: 244-251). Messalina, therefore, became an example of a woman who ethically must be viewed with utmost disdain and disgust.

Julia Agrippina also referred to as Agrippina the Minor or Agrippina the Younger (A.D. 15 - 59), was the eldest daughter of Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder. She was also the fourth wife of Emperor Claudius and mother of future Emperor Nero for whom she struggled to endear herself to Claudius. Like her ambitious predecessors, she is described by Tacitus as a ruthless enemy who destroyed her rival, Lollia Paulina. She was notorious for removing virtually anyone who was likely to be on the way of her plans. In the opinion of Scullard, Agrippina strategized to rule the Empire through her son.

She, therefore, murdered or drove to suicide potential foes such as: Domitia Lepida (Nero's aunt), M. Iunius Silanus (proconsul of Asia and great-grandson of Augustus) and the freedman Narcissus (Scullard, 1982: 305). On winning the Emperor's hand, she advertised her power to the provincials by settling soldiers in Ubii and having it named after her. She managed to persuade Claudius to adopt Nero, her son, as the guardian of Britannicus (Claudius' own son, whom he had by Messalina) (Salmon, 1968: 175).

Following the death of Claudius, which was believed to have been engineered through dishes of mushrooms, Agrippina finally succeeded in getting her young son, Nero, to the throne. In the early years of Nero's rule, Julia Agrippina had acted almost like a co-regent, also making important decisions that related to the Empire. Agrippina's head on the obverse of the coins indicates that she did in fact almost become regent. Agrippina reached the highest point of her ambition at this stage. Salmon opines that Agrippina, even though not as sexually indiscriminate as Messalina, was no paragon of female virtue. She was the mistress of one Aemilius Lepidus and of the freed slave, Pallas. Before her marriage to Claudius, Agrippina had been married to Gnaeus Domitus Ahenobarbus, who was the scion of a dissolute but powerful Roman family, and the father of Nero. She inherited the arrogant and ambitious temperament of her mother. She was ready to go through slaughter to get to the throne (Salmon, 1968: 172-173). Her unrestrained ambition led to her murder by a freedman, Anicetus at Baiae in A.D. 59 on the orders of her son, Emperor Nero (Scullard, 1982: 22).

Poppaea Sabina (A.D. 30 - 65), otherwise known as Poppaea Sabina the Younger, was, by her third marriage, the second wife of Emperor Nero. Her first marriage to Rufrius Crispinus at the age of 14 collapsed after Agrippina the Younger, as a new wife of Emperor Claudius, removed Rufrius from the position of the leader of Praetorian Guard. Like Agrippina, Poppaea was ruthless woman, who had great influence over her husband and his style of rule. As a mistress, Poppaea, according to Tacitus, continuously nagged and mocked Nero about the power his mother, Agrippina the Younger, had exercised over him. Tacitus claims that Poppaea loathed Agrippina because she was an obstacle to her marriage to Nero (Tacitus, 1996: 312, 341 & 384). Poppaea's excessive influence over Nero induced him to commit acts which can only be described as horrible, for in order to satisfy her and reassert his manly confidence and authority, Nero was induced to kill his mother (Tacitus, 1996: 141). After the death of Agrippina the Younger, Poppaea also further swayed Nero to kill his wife and step-sister, Claudia Octavia, whom he accused of infidelity and barrenness. Thus, she cleared all obstacles that had hitherto delayed her from becoming the empress. Thus, Poppaea has been generally seen as a woman, who was depraved and highly ambitious because of her lack of morals. Unfortunately, she did not reign more than three years as the empress. She, while pregnant, was once

engaged in an argument with her husband; and Nero, in a fit of anger, kicked her and she passed on afterwards.

Julio-Claudian Women's Ambition: Societal Disintegration

The *Annals* of Tacitus presents a picture of manifold crisis within the Roman Empire. In the Julio-Claudian era, this crisis was indirectly exacerbated by both the action and inaction of women in the emperors' household. For instance, it is known that the ambitious drive of these women on behalf of their sons or husbands or of themselves sometimes led to crisis. The women used every scheme available to them to gain control of the socio-political clime and influence their men. Livia Augusta, Agrippina the Elder, Agrippina the Younger, Messalina, Poppaea Sabina and several other women serve as examples of the single-minded attitude of these women.

Livia's scheming activities had two main foci: (a) succession of her son (Tiberius) from another man to the throne; and (b) securing the exit of Germanicus and his wife Agrippina (Rutland, 1978: 17-19). Her *modus operandi* was constantly crafty and her plans were normally effective. In A.D. 14, the serious illness of her husband, Augustus, caused the Romans to talk about peace, war, the Republic, but mostly, about whom the new ruler would be. Augustus' two grandsons, on whom - in the eyes of the Emperor, the future of the Principate depended, had both met premature deaths. Livia's son and Augustus' adopted son, Tiberius, with his inclinations for brutal rage, dishonesty, and surreptitious desires himself was a problem. Worse still was his mother Livia, whose inability to bear a son for Augustus was a popular subject of consideration (Rutland, 1978: 17-19). Livia took advantage of these situations to disillusion her husband to secure the throne for her son. It was not surprising that her subsequent actions had far reaching effects on the political tumults of succession and family disintegration which resulted, not only in the deaths of many but also in the exile of Julia, Augustus' daughter.

When Claudius became the emperor, the choice of a new wife for the widowed ruler became an issue. Tacitus writes in his *Annals* that the debate was an intense one. Each of Claudius' favorite freedmen championed the cause of different women. Callistus backed Lollia Paulina, daughter of the former consul, Marcus Lollius II (Tacitus, 1996: 252). Pallas supported Agrippina the Younger, the daughter of Germanicus and the niece of Claudius. Narcissus also supported Aelia Paetina (Tacitus, 1996: 252). Pallas eventually carried the day. He achieved this by pointing out the nobility of Agrippina's ancestry and the benefits of a union between the Julian and Claudian families. While Pallas implored Claudius to consider Agrippina, she was actively laying her own ploys of seductiveness to lure Claudius into her trap. Tacitus describes the crafty tricks used by Agrippina as usual weapons in the female arsenal (Tacitus, 1996: 253). Marriage between niece and uncle was not frequently

practiced in the Empire. It demanded, for the sake of appearances at least, the approval of the senate. The consultation was a charade. The suggestion of the union of uncle and niece was received with eagerness and the marriage was formalized. Claudius may have submitted himself to the will of the public, the senate and the Roman people. But in actual fact, he had already given in to the wiles of Agrippina, which negatively altered the manner of his administration.

Agrippina the Younger, in contrast to Messalina, did not initially make disrespectful mockeries of the Roman state. Rather, her actions were devoid of the usual emotional and impulsive attitudes seen in females. Before her marriage to Emperor Claudius, Agrippina had taken an important step in the progression of her son, Nero, to the throne by ensuring his engagement to Octavia, daughter of Claudius. As explained above, in A.D. 50, Claudius formally adopted him. At the same time, Agrippina received the title Augusta, a title bestowed on Livia only after Augustus' death. This was just another indication of the ambition and power of Agrippina. For the duration of Claudius' reign and even during the early months of Nero's rule as emperor, she enjoyed a position of extraordinary power. Tacitus frequently refers to Agrippina as vicious in her hatred of old adversaries; she had great influence over the actions of her husband, Claudius (Tacitus, 1996: 278).

That Agrippina's ambition was a factor in the breakdown of societal morals was no understatement. As noted above, her priorities from onset were clear: to marry the Emperor and also get her son enthroned. Thus, when Narcissus, her old enemy, departed the city, Agrippina decided that the time was right to begin to actualize her dreams. Although Agrippina initially postponed the actualization of Claudius' death in order to create the ground for the smooth succession of Nero, Claudius nevertheless gradually became the victim of her poisoned mushrooms. When Claudius' death was eventually announced, public judgment did not hesitate to point at Agrippina as the murderess. She was ready and willing to sacrifice anything and anyone in pursuit of her high ambition – the mother of the Empire turned to the vice of the state. Her bold attempt to take control of the Empire, first by exploiting her husband's weakness and later son's, eventually led to her ultimate elimination by her son. Agrippina's episode left a negative impact that tainted the moral ethos of women in Roman antiquity (Tacitus, 1996: 313). Virtue and reward was broken down in the Julio-Claudian imperial world. It was replaced by womanly wiles and unrestrained passion. Domestic scheming practiced in the imperial household, became a matter of public concern, since it was now through these tricks that emperors got enthroned.

As explained above, Poppaea Sabina, wife of Nero, was also a woman, who had great influence over him and his style of rule. She not infrequently nagged and mocked Nero about the power his mother had exercised over him after all, Agrippina, much earlier, had been an obstacle to her marriage to Nero. According to Tacitus, Sabina's appeal to Agrippina then was "reinforced by tears and all a lover's tricks". Tacitus writes that when "Poppaea saw no hope of his divorcing Octavia (Nero's first wife) and marrying her…she

nagged and mocked him incessantly. He was under his guardian's thumb, she said – 'master neither of the empire nor of himself'. She said, 'why these postponements of our marriage? I suppose my looks and victorious ancestors are not good enough. Or do you distrust my capacity to bear children? Or the sincerity of my love? No! I think you are afraid that, if we were married, I might tell you frankly how the senate is downtrodden and the public enraged by your mother's arrogance and greed. If Agrippina can only tolerate daughters-in-law who hate her son, let me be Otho's wife (Poppaea was formerly married to Otho) again. I will go anywhere in the world where I only need hear of the emperor's humiliations rather than see them – and see you in danger, like myself!"

Nero, panged by what she said, was pushed to reassert his manly confidence and authority by committing the heinous crime of matricide (Tacitus, 1996: 312). Even after the death of Agrippina and while she was still Nero's mistress, Poppaea further influenced Nero by inciting him to kill his wife, Octavia, whom he accused of infidelity (Tacitus, 1996: 34) so that all obstacles that was likely to stop her marriage to Nero might be removed. It is then clear that many of the Julio-Claudian empresses, mothers, wives, and daughters, rather than exude the virtues of true *matronae* (matrons) to advance their society, exhibited flagrant indiscipline, immorality, and wickedness all with the aim of achieving their varied notorious ambitions.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, certain deductions can now be made. The imperial era witnessed a transformation in how some women in their families acted different from the traditional norm expected of women. According to our ancient sources, the imperial women enjoyed more freedom than their counterparts in the Republican era. Liberties were taken freely by them to achieve their various political and social ambitions. Like their Julio-Claudian counterparts, women's ambition in contemporary times seems to revolve largely around issues of marriage, personal financial independence, career and education. Perhaps owing to the dynamics of cultures, climes, globalization and the likes, a vast majority of modern women's ambition is tied to their marriage, freedom and occupation with the goals directly or indirectly related to them (Turner, 1964: 271-285). It is not surprising therefore, that women sometimes go to great lengths, using manipulations of all kinds, to influence their husbands, fathers, brothers or sons to realise what they strongly desire. The ambitions and manipulations of Caesars' women to change the socio-political *status quo* of ancient Rome took the forms of subtle naggings, conspiracies, plots, promiscuity, prostitution, debaucheries, poisonings and murders of relations. Contrarily, for the contemporary women, the usage of such devious methods and general depraved behaviours is not widespread.

From the specimen of the ambitious traits of Livia, the two Agrippinas, Messalina, and Poppaea, we conclude that the ambition and quest for power of imperial women during the Julio-Claudian dynasty led to societal disintegration. The sway which the women held over the emperors and their interference in succession issues were so much that the Empire became unstable and the society witnessed socio-political chaos and moral decadency. Unlike Augustus, whose wife, Livia, partially controlled but was still able to maintain the control of the Empire, others virtually lost the grip of government because of the ambition of their mistresses or wives. Clearly, the Julio-Claudian empresses showed that women, both ancient and modern, could be capable of going through excesses to get what they want and attain their goals.

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