

The Mother of Snakes: The Reception of Agrippina the Younger in Metal Music

Agrippina the Younger is one of the more prominent women in the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Descending from a noble lineage, Agrippina was the great-granddaughter, daughter, sister, and wife of Roman emperors. Her most important and notable role would be as the mother of the future emperor, and her late husband's successor, Nero. Agrippina is an exceptional woman who defied traditionally gendered spaces, but has been defined by her domineering personality that would eventually lead to her downfall on the orders of her son. Ancient sources are hostile to Agrippina, portraying her as a woman who behaved like a man (e.g. Tac. *Ann.* 12.7.3), with accusations of incest, conspiracies, and murder surrounding her life. This perception of Agrippina continues today across different media, most notably music. The genre of metal embraces the dark, macabre, and evil themes of humanity and takes inspiration from history and mythology. Historical figures of ill repute serve as inspirations for metal songs, and women are no exception, including Agrippina. In metal lyrics, the empress is often referred to as a snake and portrayed as a deceitful and overbearing woman who would stop at nothing to get what she wanted. This paper examines the reception of Agrippina the Younger in metal by comparing and contrasting song lyrics with ancient sources. An interview with the singer and guitarist of the Northern Irish band Acid Age demonstrates how musicians approach Agrippina and the primary sources about her. Metal's depiction of Agrippina is representative of the genre's fascination with provocative and sinister themes, while also demonstrating how artists treat primary sources uncritically, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and uphold the narrative of Agrippina as a deceitful and cruel woman.