Feminization of Rhetoric at Tacitus' *Annals* 13.21

In Book 13 of Tacitus' *Annals*, Agrippina makes a speech in her own defense on the charge of conspiracy against her son Nero. Her audience is small, including only the praetorian prefect Burrus and whatever entourage he has brought to confront her, but the speech itself is incongruously. The presence of rhetoric in a private setting has been persuasively explained as a sign that imperial power has driven politics into the private sphere (Levene 2010, 213-4), but Agrippina's speech additionally transforms Roman rhetoric because its speaker and its two main targets are women. In so speaking, Agrippina modifies a masculine tradition of rhetorical invective for a woman's voice. These modifications offer a tantalizing glimpse at Roman women's political discourse, but ultimately must be considered through the lens of Tacitus' literary invention.

Agrippina situates herself in a feminized political world in which her true enemies are other women. These are Junia Silana and Domitia, who indeed had rivalrous histories with Agrippina. (Agrippina had prevented Silana from marrying (13.19.2); Domitia was the previous wife of one of Agrippina's husbands (Woodman 2004, 254 fn. 40).) Nevertheless, their inclusion in this speech is unusual, as women were not the instigators of many political prosecutions in Rome. The strategies Agrippina employs to discredit them are significant. Silana is accused of unchastity and unmotherliness: "Silana, never having given birth, has no knowledge of mothers' emotions: parents do not change their children in the same way an immoral woman her adulterers" (*Silanam, numquam edito partu, matrum adfectus ignotos habere; neque enim proinde a parentibus liberi quam ab impudica adulteri mutantur*, 13.21.2). Agrippina's dubious claim to motherly feelings notwithstanding, her implication that her rival is an adulteress (*impudica*) is accomplished neatly and effectively. Agrippina invokes traditional feminine virtues, motherhood and chastity, which are naturally uncommon in masculine rhetorical self-fashioning. Agrippina also accuses Silana of being old (*anui*), a characteristic she also named in forbidding her earlier marriage (13.19.2). Age is not a terribly important category of abuse in invective against Roman men. Corbeill notes a few

occasions on which old age is mocked in Roman rhetoric, but it does not compare to other categories of abuse (1996,182-3). Agrippina's reference to age here seems both personal and gendered. Similarly, Agrippina alleges that Domitia neglected Nero, preferring instead to cultivate her fishponds and have sex with her freedman (13.21.3).

In contrast to these lecherous and unmotherly women, Agrippina constructs a sophisticated persona for herself as moral Roman mother. When Silana and Domitia were committing adultery, indulging in luxury, and failing to produce children, Agrippina was preparing her son for his future leadership role (13.21.3). From this virtuous posture, Agrippina demands that her accusers produce evidence and affirms her loyalty to her son by referring obliquely to the crimes she has committed on his behalf (notably the murder of Claudius). Agrippina has presented a miniaturized defense that provides both moral and logical reasons for her innocence and points toward the malice of others, qualities familiar in Roman forensic oratory. It is no surprise that she will survive these accusations.

Agrippina's adaptation of Roman rhetoric combines two studied themes, the use of rhetoric and the role of women. (Ash (2017) provides a good brief summary of Tacitus' use of rhetoric.) Agrippina exploits her identity as a successful mother with her claims about chastity and insults directed against women political rivals, and this strategy seems to have been effective. The question arises: what can Agrippina's speech tell us about political conflict between elite Roman women? It is believable that politically active women had conventional ways of insulting each other, and it is likely that their language would have been influenced by rhetorical training, which was widespread in Roman education.

Many levels of mediation must be accounted for, however. Obviously, Tacitus has not recorded Agrippina's exact words, especially in a private speech like this one, which would have little chance to leave any historical record. In addition, Tacitus uses the speech to underline Agrippina's hypocrisy—she, too, has committed adultery for political gain (12.65.2), and she has threatened to desert Nero and support Britannicus (13.14.2). Nevertheless, the feminine virtues and vices evoked in Agrippina's speech represent important modifications to traditional rhetoric meant

to evoke the speaker's gender. In conclusion, Tacitus constructs a uniquely feminized version of Roman rhetoric that subverts gendered conventions only to finally underline the inappropriateness of its speaker's participation in Roman politics.

Works Cited

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