

## Starring Messalina as Maenad

This paper re-examines the episode in Tacitus *Annals* 11.26-38 of Messalina's "marriage" to Silius, exposé, and death. It focuses on the processional and performative aspects of this account, particularly Messalina's relationship with Dionysus, the most processional of gods, and the link between accompaniment, abandonment, and personal fortune. A clear link exists between the size of Messalina's retinue and clout. As her performance concludes, her troupe vanishes; outside forces take the stage, and both her life and political influence end.

The episode's parallels to drama have been studied extensively: scholars have noted the significance of Dionysus not only as the god of theater, but also of "violence, madness, and destruction" (Vessey 1971: 399); stock comic characters including the cuckolded husband and wily slave (Vessey 1971; Santoro L'Hoir 2006); use of "scene-switching" (Malloch 2013: 392); and strong parallels to Euripides' *Bacchae* (Santoro L'Hoir 2006).

This paper focuses on the entourages and roles of various characters. Dionysus is a processional god with an ever-present band of followers. In one of the most famous myths, Dionysus' arrival spells the end of Ariadne's solitude (Catullus 64). His riotous entourage, reminiscent of a Roman triumph, turns into Ariadne's wedding procession as the two unite. The association between Messalina and Ariadne has been explored by von Stackelberg (2009), but this paper takes Messalina as an Ariadne who starts in Dionysus' good graces, then becomes bereft, and attempts to return to her family, dying at last with only her mother at her side.

From the outset, Messalina and Silius' marriage is matrimony in name only (11.26). After celebrating a mock-harvest in the height of the autumn (11.31), Messalina and her troupe exit the stage. The performance's end also spells the end of her relationship with Dionysus (played by

Silius), whose fantasy world momentarily shielded her from the reality outside. Silius feigns a fearless return to business in the forum (*Silius dissimulando metu ad munia fori*, 11.32), language that recalls the daily escorted trip to the forum during the Republic known as the *deductio in forum*. Messalina, meanwhile, retreats to the gardens she had acquired by murdering their previous owner. Gardens are liminal, wild, spaces infused with godly *numen* (Santoro L’Hoir 2006), but they fail to protect Messalina. She leaves shortly afterward in a final attempt to save herself upon Claudius’ return from Ostia. Plotting a sad itinerary across Rome, she traverses the city on foot with only three attendants; her carriage, when she finally accepts one, is a humble wheelbarrow intended for garden waste (11.32)—a far cry from Dionysus’ leopard-pulled chariot. Spit out by her ill-gotten gardens, Messalina herself is *purgamenta* on parade, foreshadowing the swift, senate-decreed purging of her name and memory after death (11.38).

Messalina’s departure from Dionysus also aligns with a seasonal change. The episode’s next phase (11.33-38) recalls the Saturnalia, a festival celebrated in December during which masters and slaves switched roles. In this episode, Claudius’ ignorance of his own cuckoldry is linked to his ineptitude as emperor; meanwhile Narcissus, a freedman, takes charge “for that single day” (11.33) and “everything followed the freedman’s orders” (11.35). Narcissus acts as stage-director, assigning parts (11.37) and removing from Claudius’ view the children whose presence Messalina hoped would soften him (11.34)—a temporary removal that portends their permanent elimination (and elimination of Messalina’s bloodline) by Claudius’ eventual stepson, the murderous Nero.

As Narcissus encroaches with his men, Messalina’s power and lifeline diminish. In the garden, she finally becomes aware of the metaphorical “fourth wall,” realizing at last that the performance is up: “Then, for the first time, she perceived her fate” (11.38). The Dionysian

fantasy world of the garden can no longer shield her as newcomers (*venientes*, 11.38) violently burst onto the scene. Alone in the world, Messalina exits from life, setting the stage for the most significant newcomer—her successor, Agrippina—whose entrance into the imperial family forever changes the course of Roman history.

### Bibliography

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