

matisches Datum sprechen. So empfiehlt es sich, zu der alten, durch die *ratio temporum* nahegelegten These zurückzukehren, nach der Tacitus seinen *Dialogus de oratoribus* 120 Jahre nach Ciceros Tod, d. h. im Jahre 77 oder 78 n. Chr. spielen läßt.⁴⁶

Halle

Marcus Beck

46) Für die kritische Durchsicht des Manuskriptes, die mich vor manchem Versehen bewahrte, danke ich herzlich Prof. Dr. R. Jakobi und dem Herausgeber dieser Zeitschrift, Prof. Dr. B. Manuwald.

TACITUS, LIVIA AND THE EVIL STEPMOTHER

In the obituary notice that begins the fifth book of the *Annals* Tacitus' assessment of Livia is fair and restrained. He depicts her as a woman of old-fashioned virtue and of impressive noble lineage, and on the negative side limits himself to the observations that she was more affable (*comis*) than women of the old school would have thought right, and that she was a match for her husband's craftiness and her son's insincerity. This balance is notably absent, however, from the preceding narrative. Here Tacitus' hostility is blatant. He can scarcely mention Livia without a touch of malice, and his portrait of her as a scheming and ruthless manipulator is at variance with the general picture that appears in the other historical sources. Suetonius' and Dio's criticisms of Livia are relatively measured. Apart from an allusion to Augustus' distress over her intrigues, Pliny has nothing critical to say, while Velleius, not surprisingly, and Seneca, somewhat remarkably, are unashamed admirers.¹ Tacitus' technique is, of course, not to present blatant untruths, but to use innuendo and unverified gossip, and to exploit the power of language

1) Sen. Clem. 1,9, Cons. Marc. 2-5; Plinius, NH 7,150; Tac. Ann. 5,1.

to create a damaging effect. It has long been recognized that his most successful device for arousing deep-seated prejudice against Livia is his repeated application to her of the word *noverca* (stepmother). The purpose of this note is to show that this prejudicial association was not, in fact, Tacitus' own invention, and furthermore to suggest the historical event on which he might have drawn.

The stepmother was traditionally a hated figure in Roman literature and culture. Quintilian might have protested at the use of the stock cruel stepmother in legal exercises (*declamationes*) and have argued that she belonged to the realm of fantasy, but in the popular mind the idea was firmly established, particularly in the association of stepmothers and poison, and stepmothers as the murderers of their stepchildren, sometimes combined together. So Ovid can describe how in the Iron Age the *terribiles novercae* mixed their dark poisons. The boy in Horace's Epode who is carried into the witches' den so they can use his body for a magic potion asks why they look at him 'like a stepmother' (*ut noverca*). Yet another theme, that of the avaricious stepmother bent on financial gain, emerges at least as early as Plautus' *Pseudolus*.²

Thus, when Livia is introduced by Tacitus for the very first time, it is with the speculation that the *novercae Liviae dolus* ('craftiness of their stepmother Livia') caused the deaths of Gaius and Lucius.³ Livia was not their stepmother as traditionally understood. She had not supplanted their mother by marrying their father, and was only a stepmother in a technical sense as a result of their being adopted by their grandfather for political/dynastic reasons, at a time when their mother remained an honourable member of the house. But the very use of the word creates prejudicial damage. Similarly, in speculating on the responsibility for the death of Agrippa Postumus, Tacitus suggests that it was likely caused by Tiberius and Livia, the latter from a step-mother's hate (*novercalibus odiis*).⁴ Tacitus describes Livia's enmity towards Agrippina the Elder in almost the

2) Plaut. Pseud. 313–14, perhaps echoed in Verg. Ec. 3,33: *iniusta noverca*; Hor. Epod. 5,9; Ovid, Met. 1,147; Quint. Inst. or. 2,10,4–5; see M. J. G. Gray-Fow, *The Wicked Stepmother in Roman History and Literature: an Evaluation*, Latomus 47, 1988, 741–57; G. Vidén, *Women in Roman Literature*, Göteborg 1993, 18–22; P. A. Watson, *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny and Reality*, Leiden 1995.

3) Tac. Ann. 1,3,3.

4) Tac. Ann. 1,6,2.

same phrase (*novercalibus . . . stimulis*).⁵ This is probably the best illustration of the cynical exploitation of the concept, since the relationship here was not simply strained but absurd. Livia was the stepmother of Agrippina's mother Julia. Parallels have been cited for this last example. Scribonia, first wife of Augustus, is called the *amita* of Libo Drusus, although she was his great-aunt, and Augustus is called the *avunculus* of Germanicus, through the maternal line, although he was his great-uncle.⁶ But these references can be seen as casual usage, without any intention of exploiting the words to create prejudice. Finally, to the burdens that Augustus had to bear, Tacitus adds the culminating woe, a wife who was *gravis in rem publicam mater*, *gravis domui Caesarum noverca*. This is a particularly clever line, where the distinction between *domus* and *res publica* becomes blurred, and a woman regarded as a *mater patriae* betrayed a family so closely identified with the *patria*.⁷

It is striking that this depiction of Livia as *noverca*, which in all the contexts is strained and in one of them is essentially absurd, is absent from Suetonius and the other Latin sources, with the exception of the late fourth-century *Epitome de Caesaribus* which simply echoes Tacitus' phraseology.⁸ Clearly it was not part of their stock rhetoric about Livia. Does this mean that it is Tacitus' invention? There is, in fact, one other association of the notion of the stepmother with Livia, but in a Greek source, Dio. This passage, generally passed over in discussions of the Tacitean usage, appears in the context of the fate of Agrippa Postumus, the posthumous son of Augustus' daughter Julia and his friend Marcus Agrippa. Postumus was adopted by Augustus in AD 4, and it appears that within a relatively short period the princeps began to have serious concerns about the dangerous effect of his presence in Rome. Whether this was for political reasons or because of Agrippa's mental state the sources do not make clear. Eventually he was banished to Planasia.⁹ There are indications that this banishment might have been

5) Tac. Ann. 1,33,3.

6) Tac. Ann. 2,27,2 (*amita*); 2,43,5 (*avunculus*). See F. R. D. Goodyear (ed.), *The Annals of Tacitus: Books 1–6*, Cambridge 1972, 253.

7) Tac. Ann. 1,10,5; *mater patriae*: Tac. Ann. 1,14,1; Dio 57,12,4; 58,2,3; cf. Suet. Tib. 50,3.

8) Anon. Epit. Caes. 1,27: Livia hated Agrippa Postumus *odio novercali*.

9) Velleius 2,102,7; Suet. Aug. 65,1,4; Tac. Ann. 1,3,4; 2,39,1; Dio 55,32,2; Plinius, NH 7,149–150.

preceded by a process of *emancipatio* whereby he would be renounced by his (adoptive) father and his connection with the Julian family severed.¹⁰ With the adoption in AD 4 Agrippa had passed into the *potestas* of Augustus and thus lost all his private property, including whatever he might have inherited from his father. As Levick points out, if an adopted son should be emancipated after the death of his natural father, the son could make no claim to his natural father's goods, and would lose all claims on his adoptive father, too. Thus the adopted and then emancipated son lost on both counts, at least until the time of Justinian. Dio states that Agrippa often complained that Augustus deprived him of his inheritance, which might have been a valid charge in fact, but would have had no standing in law, and Augustus eventually transferred his property to the recently established *aerarium militare*. What is most interesting for the immediate issue is that in the same context Dio says that Agrippa slandered Livia 'as stepmother' (ὡς μητρειάν).¹¹ While Dio does not link this attack on Livia explicitly to the issue of inheritance he does, at the very least, associate her with the complaints about the 'stolen' inheritance, with the implication that Agrippa made the traditional charge of a stepmother's avarice. This passage of Dio contains the only non-Tacitean allusion to this particular role for Livia, where the charge is voiced by a specific individual. Now at the time of Agrippa's adoption he was already a young adult, his father had been dead for all his life, and his mother had been in exile for almost six years. Once again, Livia was stepmother only through adoption and not by supplanting the natural mother. Thus he was himself clearly exploiting the prejudicial effect of the word. It is a reasonable assumption that Tacitus, like Dio, drew on this specific complaint of Agrippa Postumus, and then skilfully applied it to the overall conduct of Livia.

It may, in fact, be possible to identify Tacitus' source for Agrippa's charge. A curious incident is described by Suetonius. He relates that a Junius Novatus, a plebeian, circulated a scathing letter about Augustus *Agrippae nomine* (in the name of Agrippa). Unfortunately Suetonius does not make clear what was involved.

10) J. A. Crook, CR 4, 1954, 154; B. Levick, Abdication and Agrippa Postumus, *Historia* 21, 1972, 674–697; contra: S. Jameson, Augustus and Agrippa Postumus, *Historia* 24, 1975, 287–314.

11) Dio 55,32,2.

We cannot be sure if Novatus was acting as Agrippa's agent, or had forged the letter pretending that it came from Agrippa. Nor do we know to whom the letter was addressed. Suetonius does imply that it was the actual publication of the letter that caused the offence, which suggests that it probably was genuine. Moreover, Novatus was punished only with a fine and a mild form of banishment (*levi exilio*) which also strengthens the notion that the letter was genuine. We are not told what its contents were, only that it was *asper-rima*.¹² Novatus had made the letter widely available (*in vulgus edidisset*) and the complaints it contained would have been widely known. It is reasonable to assume that the complaints about Augustus and Livia would have appeared in that letter.

In conclusion: while Tacitus shamelessly exploits the connotations of *noverca* to blacken Livia's name, we can at least exonerate him from the charge that he invented the concept of Livia as the evil stepmother and we can also suggest a historical source for the idea.

Vancouver, B. C.

Anthony A. Barrett

12) Suet. Aug. 51,1; Dio states that the charge against Augustus was made *πολλάκις*, which might refer to a reiteration of complaints in the letter or to an assumption that the letter was merely the tip of the iceberg.