

WJEC

Level 1 Certificate in Latin Literature

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Prescribed text for Unit 9532
Latin Literature Narratives

Section A:

Tacitus, *Messalina*

This is the official examination text for the
WJEC Level 1 Certificate in Latin Literature

Tacitus, *Messalina*

Messalina was the Emperor Claudius' third wife. We know little about her, because the relevant books of Tacitus have been lost. She was the daughter of Claudius' cousin and would have been around 15 years old at the time of her marriage to Claudius, who was then approaching 50. They had two children, Octavia and Britannicus, aged about seven and six respectively in 47 AD, when our narrative begins. Apparently Messalina had already been involved in a number of crimes and scandals before she began her affair with Silius.

I

Messalina burned with a fresh, almost crazy passion. For she had become so inflamed with love for Gaius Silius, the most handsome young man in Rome, that she drove Junia Silana, a noble woman, out of her marriage to him and so took possession of a lover with no ties. Silius was not unaware of the scandal or danger: but he understood that, if he refused, death would be certain and, if he agreed, there was at least some hope of hiding the crime; furthermore, he would receive great rewards. Therefore he decided to ignore the future and enjoy the present. She used to come repeatedly to his house, not secretly but with many companions; she clung to him when he went out; she gave him money and honours; finally the slaves, freedmen and belongings of the emperor were often seen in her lover's house. Claudius, however, was quite unaware of the state of his marriage.

II

Now Messalina, because her adultery was so easy, turned to new pleasures. Silius, whether he was cursed with madness or because he thought that further dangers would actually defend him from the dangers which already threatened, was insisting that concealment be cast aside. Surely they didn't need to wait for the emperor to grow old? He himself was unmarried, childless, ready to marry her and to adopt Britannicus. Messalina would keep the same power, with added security, if they forestalled Claudius, who was not alert to treachery but was quick to anger. Messalina – not out of love for her husband, but afraid that Silius, once he had obtained supreme power, might reject her – hesitated for a long time, but she was eventually persuaded. She longed for recognition of their marriage, simply because it would cause such scandal. So she just waited until Claudius went off to Ostia to make a sacrifice, then she celebrated all the ceremonies of marriage.

III

It will certainly seem incredible that, in a city which is always aware of everything and silent about nothing, any mortals possessed so much recklessness; to think that a consul designate went through a ceremony of marriage with the wife of the emperor, on a prearranged day, with witnesses present, as though they intended to have children; and when the sacrifices were over, they reclined for dinner amongst the guests, exchanged kisses and embraces and finally spent the night as a married couple! However, I have not included any of this just to make a sensational story: I am merely reporting what was heard and written by earlier generations.

5

IV

Therefore the emperor's household shuddered; those especially who had power feared a revolution. However they hoped that, if they could persuade Claudius of the enormity of her crime, Messalina could be crushed and condemned without a trial; but there was a danger that he might listen to her defence, and that his ears might be sympathetic to Messalina even if she confessed.

5

Narcissus, occasiones quaerens, cum Caesar diu apud Ostiam moraretur, duas eius paelices largitione et promissis perpulit delationem subire. exim Calpurnia (id alteri paelici nomen), ubi datum est secretum, ad genua Caesaris provoluta nupsisse Messalinam Silio exclamat; altera paelice haec confirmante, Calpurnia cieri Narcissum postulat. qui 'discidiumne tuum' inquit 'novisti? nam matrimonium Silii vidit populus et senatus et milites; ac nisi celeriter agis, tenet urbem maritus.'

10

V

tum amicos fidelissimos vocat, praesertim Lusium Getam praetorianis praefectum. eo locuto ceteri certatim circumstrepunt ut iret in castra firmaretque praetorias cohortes, securitati suae antequam vindictae consuleret. iam Claudius identidem interrogabat an ipse imperii potens, an Silius privatus esset.

5

VI

at Messalina, numquam solutior luxu, adulto autumno simulacrum vindemiae per domum celebrabat. urgebantur prela, fluebat vinum. feminae pellibus accinctae adsultabant ut sacrificantes vel insanientes Bacchae; ipsa crine fluxo thyrsus quatibat, iuxtaque Silius hedera vinctus, cothurnos gerens iaciebat caput, strepente circum procaci choro. ferunt Vettium Valentem, cum in praealtam arborem per lasciviam ascendisset, ceteris interrogantibus quid aspiceret respondisse tempestatem ab Ostia atrocem - sive coeperat ea species, seu forte lapsa vox postea in praesagium vertit. 5 10

VII

non solum rumor interea, sed undique nuntii ad Messalinam contendunt, qui Claudium omnia cognovisse et venire promptum ultioni adferrent. igitur Messalina Lucullianos in hortos, Silius dissimulando metui ad forum digrediuntur. illa tamen, quamquam res adversae consilium eximerent, ire obviam et aspici a marito statim constituit, quod saepe ei fuerat subsidium; misitque ut Britannicus et Octavia in complexum patris irent. atque interim, tribus omnino comitantibus - tam repens erat solitudo - postquam per urbem pedibus ivit, vehiculo, quo purgamenta hortorum eripiuntur, Ostiensem viam intrat. nullam misericordiam civibus commovit quia flagitiorum deformitas praevalebat. et iam erat in aspectu Claudii clamitabatque ut audiret Octaviae et Britannici matrem. Narcissus tamen obstrepuit, Silius et nuptias referens; simul codicillos libidinum indices tradidit, quibus visus Caesaris averteret. nec multo post urbem ingredienti offerebantur liberi, sed Narcissus amoveri eos iussit. 5 10 15

VIII

mirum inter haec silentium Claudii: omnia liberto oboediebat; qui contionem militum in castris paravit. apud eos praemonente Narcisso princeps pauca verba fecit: continuus dehinc clamor militum nomina reorum et poenas flagitantium. ductus Silius ad tribunal non defensionem, non moras temptavit, sed precatus est ut mors acceleraretur. 5

interim Messalina Lucullianis in hortis prolatare vitam, componere preces, nonnulla spe et ira: tantam superbiam etiam tum gerebat. ac nisi caedem eius Narcissus properavisset, vertisset perniciem in accusatorem. nam Claudius domum regressus, ubi cena vinoque incaluit, imperavit ut femina misera (hoc enim verbo Claudium usum esse ferunt) ad causam dicendam postridie adesset. quod ubi Narcissus audivit et languescere iram redire amorem vidit, timebat, si moraretur, propinquam noctem et uxorii cubiculi memoriam; igitur prorumpit denuntiatque centurionibus et tribuno, qui aderat, exsequi caedem: ita imperatorem iubere. 10 15

IX

One of the freedmen was also sent. He hurried on ahead into the gardens and found Messalina sprawled on the ground. Sitting beside her was her mother Lepida, who had not been on friendly terms with her daughter while she prospered, but had begun to pity her in her final hour of need. She urged her not to await the executioner; her life was over and there was nothing worth hoping for except a decent death. But in Messalina's mind, corrupted by her immoral goings-on, not a shred of decency existed. Tears and pointless complaints were pouring out, when the doors were forcibly broken down by some people coming in and a tribune stood in front of her. It was then for the first time that Messalina realised her plight. She took a sword and, trembling, pointed it feebly towards her throat and chest. The tribune soon ran her through. Her body was left with her mother. 5 10

X

Claudius was feasting when word arrived that Messalina had perished. He asked no more, but demanded a goblet and ate and drank as normal at a banquet. Not even in the days that followed did he show signs of hatred, joy, anger, or sadness – in fact of any human emotion, not when he saw the accusers rejoicing, nor when he saw his children grieving. The senate helped him to forget Messalina by decreeing that the name and statues of Messalina should be removed from all private and public places. 5