

Version 1.00 3rd September 2013

Messalina

(Edited extract from Tacitus, *Annals* XI, 12-13, 26-38)

Summary of the story

Messalina, the wife of the emperor Claudius, fell in love with Gaius Silius, the consul designate, and began an affair with him. Although she conducted the affair quite openly, Claudius at first remained ignorant. After several months, Silius persuaded Messalina that they should be married, and, during Claudius' absence from Rome, they celebrated a marriage ceremony. Claudius' freedman, Narcissus, arranged for Claudius to be told about the marriage, then urged him to act quickly to prevent Silius taking control of Rome. When Messalina heard that Claudius had found out about her marriage to Silius and was on his way back to the city she decided to go to meet him and beg for forgiveness, but Narcissus intervened to prevent Claudius being won over by her pleas. Claudius proceeded to the camp of the Praetorian Guard and briefly addressed the troops, who called for the deaths of Silius and Messalina. Silius was condemned to death. Meanwhile Messalina had fled to the gardens of Lucullus. Narcissus was afraid that Claudius would relent and forgive Messalina, so he sent soldiers and one of his freedmen to kill her. They found her with her mother, Lepida, who was urging her to commit suicide, as the only honourable course of action left. Finally, she took the sword, but did not succeed in killing herself; she was killed by one of the soldiers.

The affair between Messalina and Silius began in 47 AD and was brought to an end in the following year; more precise dating is not possible.

Text and adaptation

This version of the death of Messalina has been adapted from Tacitus' account in *Annals* XI. Some cuts have been made to bring the extract to an appropriate length. The Latin has also been simplified to make it more accessible to students at this level: some sentences and phrases have been omitted, and there are some alterations in vocabulary and word order. Nevertheless the language remains close to the original.

Tacitus and history

Publius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus was born in about 56 AD, possibly in Gaul. Like many high-ranking provincials, he came to Rome to pursue a political career. He was a member of the senate, became consul, and in 112-3 AD was governor of Asia. He died after 117 AD. Tacitus wrote two major historical works, the *Annals* and the *Histories*, in which he gave an account of the history of Rome from the accession of the emperor Tiberius to the death of Domitian (14-96 AD). About half of these works has survived.

Tacitus' account of the Julio-Claudian emperors has been known as the *Annals* (Latin *Annales*) only since the sixteenth century. Its original title was *ab excessu divi Augusti* (*After the death of the divine Augustus*). The title *Annales* is derived from the way Tacitus organised his material, describing all the events of each year before moving on to the next. This was a traditional Roman way of organising and writing history.

Tacitus claims that he is impartial (**sine irā et studiō**, 'without indignation and partisanship', *Annals* 1.1.3). The facts he reports are generally accurate, but he tends to emphasise the oppressive aspects of the imperial system and concentrate on the faults of the emperors.

The Romans regarded history as a branch of literature. An historian was expected to tell a good story in a highly descriptive, dramatic and emotional style. It was accepted that he would invent speeches and elaborate on circumstantial detail. Tacitus wrote his history of the events of 59 AD in about 114 AD, over fifty years later. Although he had access to contemporary accounts and records, he does not give much information about his sources, and from the level of detail it is clear that there is a large amount of speculation and imagination.

People

Claudius	The emperor, also known as Caesar or prīnceps .
Messalīna	Claudius' third wife.
C. Sīlius	Gaius Silius, a young nobleman. He was the consul designate (i.e. he had been appointed but not yet installed in office).
Iūnia Silāna	Silius' wife.
Britannicus	The son of Claudius and Messalina, about six years old.
Octāvia	The daughter of Claudius and Messalina, about seven years old.
Lepida	Domitia Lepida, Messalina's mother.
Narcissus	One of Claudius' freedmen and secretaries, in charge of his correspondence.
Calpurnia	one of Claudius' mistresses.

Places

Ostia	The harbour-town of Rome.
Lūculliānī hortī	The gardens of Lucullus, a large park near the centre of Rome. Messalina had recently acquired these gardens after contriving the death of their previous owner.
Ostiēnsis via	The via Ostiensis, the road which led from Rome to Ostia.

Further biographical information on Claudius, Messalina, Narcissus and Britannicus

Claudius

Tiberius Claudius Nero Germanicus (10 BC - 54 AD) became emperor in 41AD, succeeding Caligula. Because of his physical infirmity (he suffered from a limp and a speech impediment, perhaps resulting from cerebral palsy), he had not been regarded as a potential emperor; however, when Caligula was assassinated in January 41 AD the Praetorian Guard proclaimed Claudius emperor, and the senate reluctantly accepted him. Claudius continued to retain the support of the army and Praetorian Guard, but his relations with the senate were difficult. He entrusted much of the administration of the empire to several Greek freedmen; this increased the alienation of the senate. After the death of Messalina Claudius married Agrippina, who already had a son, Nero. Claudius died in 54 AD; possibly he was poisoned on the order of Agrippina, to further the interests of her son Nero.

Messalina

Valeria Messalina (before 20 AD-48 AD) was the great-granddaughter of Octavia, Augustus' sister; her father was Claudius' cousin. The date of her birth is uncertain: according to *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* she was born some time before 20 AD. She married Claudius in 39 or 40 AD when she was about twenty years old. Claudius may have been her first husband, although she would be rather old for this as Roman girls were usually married at about fourteen. Claudius was about fifty and this was his third marriage. At the time of the marriage Caligula was emperor and Claudius was not expected to succeed. Claudius and Messalina had two children, Octavia and Britannicus. Before the affair with Silius, Messalina had already been involved in several crimes and scandals; Tacitus says that she was responsible for a number of assassinations or executions. She was of political importance to Claudius because she was the mother of his only son, Britannicus.

Narcissus and other imperial freedmen

Claudius relied on the advice of several freedmen, including Narcissus, and he mistrusted the senate. The senate hated these freedmen because of their influence and wealth.

Britannicus

Tiberius Claudius Germanicus (41-55 AD). The name Britannicus was added after his father's conquest of Britain in 43 AD. When Claudius died he was succeeded by Nero, the son of Agrippina, whom Claudius married after the death of Messalina. Soon after becoming emperor Nero almost certainly poisoned Britannicus.

Further reading

Translations

Damon, Cynthia, *Tacitus: Annals* (London: Penguin 2012)

Grant, M. *The Annals of Imperial Rome by Cornelius Tacitus* (London: Penguin 1971)

Woodman, A.J. *The Annals by Cornelius Tacitus* (Indianapolis: Hackett 2004)

Modern scholarship

Ash, Rhiannon, *Tacitus (Ancients in Action)* (London: Duckworth 2006)

Levick, Barbara, *Claudius* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1990)

Fiction

Graves, Robert, *Claudius the God* (London: Penguin 2006) chapters 28-9, and the BBC DVD based on the book.

Suggestions for reading and teaching

- Encourage students to focus on motivation by stopping at intervals during reading to ask them to think about why the characters act as they do. Some of the comprehension and personal response questions are designed to get students thinking in this way and reading between the lines as they read the story.
- Encourage students to distinguish fact from interpretation and think of alternative interpretations.
- Show a DVD of the BBC dramatisation of relevant parts of Robert Graves' *Claudius the God*. It would be better to do this after reading the story so that students will be aware of the differences. Seeing the DVD may confuse some students; teachers will have to use their judgement about whether it would be appropriate for their own students. On the other hand, with some groups it could provide a springboard for fruitful discussion of conflicting interpretations and differences between fact and fiction.
- In discussing style teachers need to bear in mind that the Latin has been adapted.
- It is often useful to adopt the following approach before attempting a translation.
 1. Read aloud - to emphasise phrasing and stress word groups.
 2. Study the vocabulary.
 3. Break up complex sentences into constituent parts for comprehension and translation.
 4. Comprehension and linguistic questions.

Language and style

The extract contains quite a lot of reported speech, some of it extended over several sentences. Therefore, teachers may like to precede reading the extract with some revision of infinitives and the accusative and infinitive construction. There are also several present participles in the dative and genitive.

The language has been adapted, but the passage still bears some marks of Tacitus' distinctive style, e.g. economy of expression, epigrammatic expression, asyndeton, using nouns rather than verbs.

Notes on the text

Section I Adultery (*Annals* 11.12-13)

Messalina falls in love with Gaius Silius and begins an affair with him. Although she conducted the affair openly, Claudius remained ignorant of her adultery.

- 1 **novō**: indicating that Messalina had had at least one affair previously.
quasi īnsānō: Roman poets frequently presented love as a form of madness. Here **īnsānō** has further point in that for Messalina and Silius their affair will be dangerous if Claudius finds out. The literal translation of **quasi** is 'as if'; translate it here as 'as it were' or 'one could say', i.e. it has the effect of putting **īnsānō** in inverted commas, indicating that the word is being used slightly differently from its usual sense in the context of love.
- 1-2 **īncēnsa est ... exarserat**: Roman writers frequently use fire as a metaphor for love. The teacher could ask students to consider the ways in which love is like a fire.
in C. Sīlium ... exarserat: exardēscere in (+ accusative) = 'be inflamed (with love) for'.
C. Sīlium: Gaius is abbreviated to C. Originally the letter c represented both c- and g- sounds.
- 1-2 **ita ... ut**: students sometimes do not recognise a result clause. Instead, many tend to assume that **ut** + a subjunctive verb is a purpose clause. Comprehension questions can lead them to a correct interpretation, e.g. 'What two things resulted from Messalina falling in love with Silius?'
- 3 **Iūniam Sīlānam**: she died in exile.
- 3-4 **mātrimōniō eius exturbāret**: **eius** is an objective genitive and refers to Silius. Lit. 'marriage of him', but translate here as 'her marriage to him'. The phrase **mātrimōniō exturbāre** means 'to divorce' (lit. 'to force out of marriage'). Usually it is used of a husband divorcing his wife. Here, however, the subject is Messalina. Students could be asked what this suggests about Messalina.

- 4 **liberōque adulterō potirētur**: 'took a lover [who was] unencumbered [by a wife]'. Alternatively, understand **eō** ('him'), as object of **potirētur**. 'took [him], unencumbered by a wife, as her lover. Students may find this difficult to construe. Teachers could help by asking linguistic and comprehension questions, such as:
- What does **potirētur** mean? How do you explain the ending **-tur**? (Students may need a reminder about deponent verbs.)
 - What did Messalina take possession of? (Perhaps give them a hint that **potior** takes the ablative.)
 - Who was her lover?
 - In what sense was he **liberō**?
 - In the phrase **liberō adulterō** which word is emphasised? How can you convey this emphasis in your translation?

Silius would be 'free' in the sense that he would no longer have a wife. **adulterō**: The emperor August introduced a law in 18BC which made adultery a crime. Before this time adultery had been a matter for the family. Adultery was defined as sex outside marriage between a Roman male citizen and a married Roman female citizen or between a married Roman female citizen and any male. The normal penalty was to be banished to an island and have part of one's property and dowry confiscated. If a husband had clear evidence of his wife's adultery he had to divorce her. Note the double standard; a married male citizen was allowed to have sex with slaves, ex-slaves and unmarried female lower-class citizens, whereas a married female upper-class citizen was expected to have sex only with her husband. Adultery by a man was only a crime if the woman was a respectable married woman. Augustus even banished his own daughter Julia when he found out about her adultery.

- 6 **fore**: the future infinitive of **esse**, an alternative to **futūrum esse**. **facinoris celandī**: 'of concealing the crime', *lit.* 'of the crime being concealed'. **celandī** is a gerundive, agreeing with **facinoris**. Students will probably not have met this use of the gerundive in the genitive case.
- 6-7 **nōnnūllam ... spem**: notice the word order. The adjective is separated from its noun by the dependent genitive phrase. The effect is to emphasise the key word **nōnnūllam**.
- 7 **simulque ... acceptūrum**: this is still part of the indirect statement introduced by **intellēxit**. **acceptūrum** = **acceptūrum esse**, the future infinitive. Tacitus often omits forms of the verb **esse**.
- 8 **placuit**: understand **eī**; 'it was pleasing [to him]', i.e. 'he decided'. **neglegere futūra** (et) **praesentibus fruī**: **futūra** is the future participle of **sum**; the neuter plural is used as a noun, literally 'things about to be' = 'the future'. **praesentibus** is a neuter plural adjective = 'present things', i.e. 'the present'. It is common in Latin to use the neuter form of

adjectives and participles as nouns. Omission of the connective **et** (**asyndeton**) makes the expression more economical and forceful. Notice the word order: in the second limb, the order of infinitive (A) and participle (B) is reversed:

neglegere	futūra	praesentibus	frui
infinitive 1	participle 1	participle 2	infinitive 2
A	B	B	A

This pattern of words is called **chiasmus**. The effect is to draw the reader's/listener's attention to the two contrasting pairs of words.

9 **illa**: Messalina.

multis cum comitibus: the preposition is sandwiched between adjective and noun. This is a common word order in Latin.

ventitat: it is common in Latin to use a present tense where English would use a past tense; this is known as the historic present tense. An historic present tense can be translated into English as either a present or a past tense. The effect of using the historic present tense is to make events more vivid or immediate. The usage occurs frequently in this extract and will not usually be commented on. **ventitō** is the frequentative form of **veniō**, indicating that the action was done repeatedly. Students can be asked to suggest translations that convey the frequentative sense, e.g. 'she visited him repeatedly'.

9 **ēgredientī (Siliō)**: **ēgredientī** is the dative singular of the present participle, referring to Silius.

10 **dat opēs honōrēsque**: Roman women could own property and were in charge of their own wealth; however, the next sentence shows that at least some of the property she bestowed on Silius belonged to her husband, the emperor Claudius. The honours presumably were public office and status. Silius' designation to the consulship may have been a gift from Messalina; she could have obtained them for him by using her influence with the emperor.

11 **at**: marks a strong contrast.

12 **mātrimōniī suī ... ignārus**: Literally, 'unaware of his own marriage'. This sentence is typical of Tacitus' economy of expression. Teachers could help students by asking, 'In what sense do you think Claudius was unaware of his marriage?' A suitable translation would be 'was unaware of the state of his own marriage' or 'was unaware of his own marital problems'.

Discussion

Discussion will probably revolve around the three main characters - Messalina, Silius and Claudius - and how Tacitus presents them and the situation. Students will need some background knowledge about Messalina and Claudius in order to understand their behaviour and appreciate the risks

Messalina and Silius were taking. Despite her youth, Messalina had already had experience of scandal and crime, and she was so powerful and so selfish that she would have had no hesitation in denouncing Silius if he refused her advances. Tacitus presents Messalina as taking the initiative in the affair, while Silius is the victim. For example, Messalina is the subject of **exturbāret** and **potirētur**. She makes it clear to him that she will engineer his death somehow if he refuses (**exitium ... certum**). She is so confident (or reckless?) that she makes no attempt to hide her affair (**nōn fūrtim, saepe vidēbantur**). Encourage students to understand Silius' situation, by asking:

- What would happen to Silius if he rejected Messalina's advances?
- What might happen if he consented?
- What additional incentive did he have for embarking on an affair with Messalina?
- What might these **magna praemia** be?
- Is it reasonable for Silius to think he could avoid the affair being detected by Claudius? (Consider what you know about Claudius and about Messalina's previous activities.)
- Do you have any sympathy for Silius?

It might help to ask students to imagine themselves with a similar dilemma to Silius' - on the one hand, do something dangerous which has a risk of success; on the other hand refuse to take the risk and face certain death. This will help them see that, the way it is presented by Tacitus, Silius had no real choice.

Teachers could also ask: 'Does Tacitus tell the reader/listener anything about Silius' feelings for Messalina?'. Perhaps **praesentibus fruī** contains a hint, but this could be accounted for by the gifts and honours; otherwise the infatuation seems to be one-sided.

Ask students to pick out the details Tacitus uses to emphasise the way Messalina flaunts her affair, e.g. **ēgredientī adhaeret**, she clings to him when he goes out of the house i.e. she drapes herself over him in public. Students could be asked to suggest why she might have done this. Perhaps she despised her husband, or her passionate attraction to Silius made her reckless. The elaboration of the ways in which Messalina conducts her affairs so publicly contrasts with Tacitus' dismissal of Claudius in a single brief sentence, with the emphasis on the final word **ignārus**.

Questions

This passage introduces the three main characters in the story. Make brief notes on your impressions of:

- Silius
- Messalina
- Claudius

Support your ideas with examples taken from the passage.

Section II Messalina and Silius get married (*Annals* 11.26-27)

Tacitus leaves the story of the affair to deal with other events of the year 47 AD. He returns to it at the start of 48 AD. The affair had, meanwhile, continued, still without Claudius' knowledge.

Silius persuades Messalina to marry him. She is at first hesitant, but finally agrees. They get married while Claudius is away at Ostia.

- 1 **adulteriōrum**: the plural could either be exaggeration or it could indicate that Messalina had a series of affairs.
- 1-2 **novās libidinēs**: Tacitus reveals what these new pleasures were later in this section. Either Tacitus is hinting at some new vices or he is anticipating what happens.
- 2-4 **Silius ... urgēbat**: this is a difficult sentence. Teachers can help students by reading aloud with careful attention to phrasing and emphasis on the key words: **sīve, an, ratus, urgēbat**. Then ask comprehension questions, with some hints, to elicit understanding of each clause, e.g.
- The phrases introduced by **sīve** and **an** introduce two possible motives for Silius' behaviour. The first is expressed by an ablative phrase (**fātālī insāniā**). Hint: translate the ablative as 'because of' or 'through'. So, what is the first possible motive Tacitus attributes to Silius?
 - Silius' alternative motive is introduced by **ratus**: Tacitus is telling the reader what Silius was thinking. **ratus** can be translated as 'thinking' or 'because he thought'. The content of his thought is expressed in an indirect statement (accusative and infinitive with the infinitive **esse** omitted): he thought that something was a remedy for something else. Hint: Latin says that something was a remedy *of* something, using the genitive case. This should elicit the response that dangers (**perīcula**) were a remedy for dangers (**perīculōrum**). This enigmatic statement can be left for the moment.
 - Now ask students which adjectives/participles qualify **perīcula** and **perīculōrum**. They should now see that Tacitus is saying that dangers themselves are a remedy for threatening dangers. Students can be asked to rephrase this idea in their own words. They may need help to come up with something like 'Taking a risk now can avert danger in the future.'; or 'Dangerous situations demand dangerous solutions.' The English proverb 'Attack is the best form of defence' could be compared.
 - Now focus on the final clause, to which the rest of the sentence has been building up: **abrumpī dissimulātiōnem urgēbat**. What was Silius doing? What was he insisting should be done?

- 2 **sīve ... an:** this is the only occurrence in Tacitus of this combination (standing for **sīve ... sīve**). Tacitus often presents the reader/listener with two alternative motivations, and often the second alternative offers the interpretation Tacitus prefers; it is left to linger in the reader's mind. Here the variation (**variātiō**) in vocabulary and syntax (the first alternative is expressed as an ablative phrase, the second as a participle, **ratus**, with dependent indirect statement) draws the reader's attention to the second alternative. Moreover, the second alternative is longer and is expressed in a memorable, epigrammatic form.
- 2-3 **an ipsa perīcula remedium imminentiū periculōrum ratus:** this is typical of Tacitus' epigrammatical style. Silius' plan becomes clear later: the removal, and probably murder, of Claudius. Once this was accomplished, there would be less likelihood of anyone trying to punish Silius, especially if he could use his proposed marriage to Messalina as a stepping-stone to the throne. For the moment, however, it is enough for students to understand that Silius' plan involves taking a risk in order to protect himself. The details of the plan will emerge gradually. Teachers can check on students' understanding by asking them what the **imminentiū periculōrum** consist of: presumably, the danger of Claudius finding out about their affair.
- 3-4 **abrupmī dissimulātiōnem urgēbat:** a rare use of **urgeō** with accusative and infinitive to express an indirect command; normally it would be followed by **ut** or **ne** + subjunctive. Ask students who is being kept in the dark about the adultery - only Claudius. If necessary, refer them back to the end of the previous section.
urgēbat: notice the imperfect tense, suggesting that Silius' kept on insisting.
- 4-8 **quippe ... esset:** in these three sentences Tacitus is reporting Silius' words. The colon after **urgēbat** indicates that a section of reported speech is going to follow. The main verbs are infinitives (sometimes **esse** is omitted) and the verbs in the subordinate clauses are subjunctive. There are two ways of translating extended sections of reported speech. Either start off in English with an introductory verb, e.g. 'He said that ...' or convert the words to direct speech. **sē** refers to Silius.
- 4 **nōn exspectandum:** add **esse**. **exspectandum** is an impersonal passive gerundive. Teachers could ask the class, 'What, according to Silius, should they not wait for?'
- 5 **sē caelibem:** refer students back to Section 1 lines 3-4 to remind them of Silius' divorce. Ask them 'In what tone of voice do you think Silius uses the word **caelibem**? Is he being ironic?'

5-6 **nūptiīs et adoptandō Britannicō parātum: adoptandō** is a gerundive and the dative case depends on **parātum**. Help students by asking:

- What thing was he ready for?
- What was he ready to do?
- Whom was he ready to adopt?

Check that students remember that Britannicus is the son of Claudius and Messalina. Silius' suggestion is startling. It would be legal for Silius to marry Messalina and adopt Britannicus (and presumably Octavia, the sister of Britannicus, as well) only after Claudius had died or she had divorced him. Romans thought it was very important to have a male heir to continue the family and inherit property. An upper-class Roman man who did not have a son would often adopt an heir. Roman emperors often did this to ensure a successor.

6-7 **eandem Messalinae potentiam**: the separation of adjective and noun may be a stumbling block. Help students by asking:

- Would Messalina's power be the same or different?
- In what sense would her power remain the same?

This should help students see that what Silius is arguing is that she will still be the wife of an emperor, only the emperor will be Silius, not Claudius.

Notice that the word order puts emphasis on **eandem**.

7 **additā sēcūritāte**: lit. 'with freedom from anxiety (*or* safety) having been added', i.e. 'with, in addition, freedom from anxiety (*or* safety)'. **sēcūritās** can be translated as either 'freedom from anxiety' or 'safety, security'. Ask students, 'What additional advantage would Messalina have?' Either interpretation of **sēcūritās** is acceptable here and the merits of each could be discussed with the class. Is there evidence that Messalina has shown anxiety so far? In what sense would she be more secure?

7-8 **sī praevenirent Claudium**: ask: 'On what condition would Messalina gain these two advantages?'

8 **īnsidiīs incautus**: 'slow to suspect intrigue', lit. 'unsuspecting as regards plots'. **īnsidiīs** is dative. Silius may be twisting the truth here to make his plan more convincing to Messalina. Certainly, Tacitus has presented Claudius as easily duped by Messalina; however, his past behaviour, as recorded by Tacitus, shows him to have been on his guard against potential plots against him. Messalina must have been aware that she was a possible suspect.

ad iram celer: i.e. once he did suspect a plot he reacted quickly. This explains why Silius is saying that it is important to act quickly, before Claudius becomes suspicious.

- 9-10 **Messalina ... haesitāvit**: reading aloud with careful attention to phrasing will help students understand this sentence. Follow up with comprehension questions, e.g.
- Did Messalina decide immediately or did she take her time?
 - Which two words tell you this?
 - What, according to Tacitus, was not the reason why she hesitated?
 - What explanation does Tacitus give for her hesitation? Pick out the word that tells the reader/listener how she felt.
 - What did she fear Silius would do to her?
 - What would he have done before he rejected her?
- 9 **amōre**: the ablative expresses the cause of Messalina's behaviour, 'not through love for (**in**) her husband'.
- 10 **summa**: the neuter plural of the adjective is used as a noun = 'the heights' i.e. 'supreme power, the throne'.
sē: 'her', referring to the subject of the sentence, Messalina.
- 11 **persuāsum**: impersonal passive. Tacitus' sentence is very economical, abbreviated from **eī persuasum est**. This is impossible to translate literally into English ('It was persuaded to her!'). A close translation might be something like, 'Persuasion was given to her'. Translate as 'she was persuaded'.
nōmen ... mātirimōniī: the idea here could be that it was a marriage in name only because she was not divorced from her husband. Alternatively the idea of being called Silius' wife (the label 'marriage') appealed to her because marriage was more outrageous than adultery. The phrase could be translated as 'the idea of marriage' or 'the label of marriage'.
- 12 **nec ultrā ... quam dum**: 'only until', *lit.* 'not longer than until'.
- 13 **sacrificiī grātiā**: the preposition **grātiā** regularly follows its dependent genitive noun. Claudius was chief priest (**pontifex maximus**) and so would have overseen important sacrifices.
Ostiam: 'to Ostia'. With the names of towns the accusative is regularly used without a preposition to indicate movement towards. Ostia was Rome's harbour, situated at the mouth of the River Tiber, about sixteen miles from the city. It was the place where the grain, imported mainly from Egypt, was unloaded. Rome's population was heavily dependent on imported grain, and maintenance of the grain supply was one of an emperor's important preoccupations. Therefore, the sacrifice may have been in connection with the grain supply. An alternative explanation is that it was something to do with a temple which Claudius had built at Ostia, perhaps a dedication.

Discussion

The main focus of discussion will be Silius' plan. It is important to check that students understand what Silius is proposing to do. The plan has two elements: (i) to make the affair public by getting married; (ii) to usurp, or perhaps even murder, Claudius. Neither Silius nor Tacitus makes this second part of the plan explicit; it is necessary to read between the lines. Ask students to pick out the key elements of Silius' plan, in particular the hints of the plot to overthrow the emperor, e.g. **adoptandō Britannicō, eandem Messalīnae potentiam, insidiīs, summa adeptus**. Following on this, the class could be asked to suggest why Tacitus wrote in this way. Is the obscure style of writing a reflection of the intrigue of the situation?

Students are likely to raise the question: 'Why did Messalina marry Silius?' After all, she was still married to Claudius. Tacitus, in the next section, goes on to describe the marriage as incredible (**fābulōsum**), and most readers would agree. Tacitus' explanation is that she was becoming bored with mere adultery and was excited by the audacity of Silius' proposal. Another possible explanation is that her motive was political. If Silius was involved in an attempted coup, possibly Messalina agreed to participate to safeguard her own position and that of her son Britannicus. It was quite possible that Claudius would die before Britannicus was old enough to succeed him and if that happened Messalina and Britannicus would be in a weak position.

Questions

1. Silius' plan has two parts. What are they? Pick out some key words and phrases that tell the reader or listener what Silius is proposing to do?
2. Who seems to be in control now - Messalina or Silius? Has there been a change since the end of Section I?
3. Has your view of either Silius or Messalina or both changed? Give a reason for your opinion.

Section III Tacitus' verdict on the marriage (*Annals* 11.27)

- 1-8 vidēbitur ... coniugālī: vidēbitur** introduces an extended section of reported speech ('It will seem incredible that ...'). Main verbs are infinitives and verbs in subordinate clauses are subjunctive. Ask students to look out for the perfect active infinitives - perhaps remind them of the ending **-isse**.
- 1 fābulōsum:** draw students' attention to the cognate noun **fābula**. Tacitus' choice of adjective suggests that these events belong more to the world of myth and fantasy. He is anticipating the reaction of a reader or listener that the marriage is so incredible that it must be fiction.
- tantum sēcūrītātis: sēcūrītātis** is a partitive genitive, literally 'so much of lack of anxiety' i.e. 'so much lack of anxiety'. The word has already been used in by Silius (Section II line 7) with the meaning 'freedom from anxiety' or 'security'. Here it has the meaning 'recklessness' or 'carelessness', i.e. lack of concern for personal safety.
- 1-2 ullis mortālibus fuisse:** the dative + a form of **esse** expresses possession. *Lit.* 'that there was for any mortals' i.e. 'that any mortals had'.
- 2 cīvitāte:** Rome.
- nihil:** used here with adverbial force = 'in no respect, not at all'.
- 3-5 cōnsulem ... convēnisse:** remind students that the indirect statement continues after the semicolon. Students could be asked to pick out or highlight the accusative and infinitive.
- cōnsulem dēsīgnātum:** Silius had been appointed consul for AD 48, but had not yet taken up office.
- 4 eīs quī obsīgnārent adstantibus:** the relative clause is inside an ablative absolute. The subjunctive verb in the relative clause expresses purpose: 'who were to sign'. The marriage ceremony involved signing a contract.
- 5 suscipiendōrum liberōrum causā: causā** + a gerundive and noun in the genitive case = 'for the sake of ...ing'. The preposition **causā** is regularly placed after its noun. This phrase, or a similar formula, may have formed part of the marriage contract or have been spoken in the ceremony.
- velut:** the effect is to put the phrase **suscipiendōrum liberōrum causā** in inverted commas (like **quasi** in Section I line 1). This draws attention to the fact that this is not the real purpose of the marriage, and, indeed, it may not be a real marriage at all.
- convēnisse:** the phrase **in matrimonium convēnisse** = 'to marry'.
- 5-8 atque ... coniugālī:** students may need reminding that the reported speech is continuing. Ask them to pick out the accusative pronoun (**illōs** - who does it refer to?) and the three perfect infinitives.

- 6 **sacrificiis perfectis inter convivas discubuisse**: the Roman marriage ceremony was followed by a sacrifice, generally of a pig, then a feast. For a description of a Roman wedding ceremony see *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* s.v. Marriage ceremonies, *Roman*.
- 7-8 **licentiā coniugālī**: an interesting phrase. **licentiā** means 'licence' or 'freedom', and usually in Tacitus it has a negative connotation of lack of restraint. However, it also has a positive meaning of 'privilege', or 'permission', i.e. 'what is allowed'. Note that it is cognate with **licet** ('it is allowed'). A suitable translation might be 'with the freedom reserved for married couples' or 'enjoying the privileges of marriage'. Yardley has 'freely as a married couple'.
- 8-9 **audita ... ā seniōribus**: either 'things heard *by* my elders' or 'things heard *from* older men'.

Discussion

Discussion of this section can centre on why Tacitus included this lengthy comment on the veracity of his material and, secondly, the tone of the passage. Tacitus starts by anticipating the likely objection of a reader or listener, both ancient and modern, that these events are so unbelievable that they must be invented. And he ends with the denial that his motive is sensationalism - he is just reporting what he or others have heard and what other writers have recorded. An ancient reader would then have found the behaviour of Messalina and Silius as puzzling as we do.

Students could be asked to pick out details relating to the marriage ritual. Then consider whether this piling up of details of the marriage ritual, and its religious elements, makes the events seem more formal and legitimate or more shocking and incredible. Perhaps also draw students' attention to **velut** (line 4), suggesting there is something fake about the marriage.

Questions

1. How does Tacitus refer to Silius and Messalina in line 3? What is the effect of using these descriptions rather than their names? (Hint: consider the contrast with **ūllis mortālibus**, lines 1-2.)
2. How does Tacitus make the events he is narrating seem shocking and unbelievable?

Sections I-III: Discussion

Tacitus' comment in Section III forms a bridge between the marriage and the fatal consequences that follow from it. This would be a good point to pause and consider the first three sections as a whole. Questions to consider could include:

- How much truth is there in Tacitus' account? Did Silius and Messalina really get married while Claudius was still alive?
- What were the motives of Silius and Messalina?
- Was there a plan for a coup d'état? If so, does this seem a reasonable way to go about it?

Section IV Messalina is denounced (*Annals* 11.28-30)

- 1** **domus p̄ncipis**: the members of the imperial staff.
- 1-2** **eī quī potentiam habēbant**: the freedmen (**libertī**) who were Claudius' closest advisers and had most to lose from a coup. These ex-slaves were employed by the emperor as personal assistants and advisers. Some of Claudius' freedmen became extremely rich and powerful; their influence with the emperor was often resented by Roman nobles and senators.
- 2** **rēs verterentur**: 'that there would be a coup', or 'that the government would be overthrown', *lit.* 'that things would be overturned'. **rēs** here has the sense of 'government'.
At this point the set text omits a passage in which the freedmen discuss the situation: they see Silius as posing a definite threat to the regime, and express fears about Claudius' gullibility and subservience to his wife. Tacitus is now definitely making it clear that Silius was seen as plotting to overthrow Claudius.
- 3-4** **sī ... persuāsissent**: pluperfect subjunctive in indirect statement (for a future perfect in the original direct statement): 'they hoped that if ...'.
- 3** **sceleris**: this could be the marriage or the plot to overthrow Claudius or both.
- 4** **sine quaestiōne**: if Messalina were put on trial Claudius would be the judge. Claudius' freedmen wanted to avoid giving Messalina any opportunity of putting her case and winning Claudius over. A trial would also have brought unwelcome publicity, and the delay might have given Messalina time to persuade Claudius to forgive her.
- 5-6** **perīculum esse nē ... nēve**: Tacitus is continuing to report what Claudius' advisers thought; this is indicated by the accusative and infinitive construction, **perīculum esse**. **perīculum esse** is followed by two fear clauses, **nē ... nēve**, 'there was a danger that ... and that ...'.

Tacitus has reported what the freedmen hoped; now he records what they feared. Teachers could ask:

- Look at **perīculum esse**: in contrast to the hope that Messalina could be condemned without trial, what did Claudius' advisers feel?
- They feared two dangers (**nē ... nēve**). What were they?

5 **ille**: Claudius.

6 **clausae aurēs ... nōn essent**: this is a vivid restatement of **dēfēnsiōnem audīret**, but with the addition of **etiam cōnfitentī**, 'even if she confessed'.

cōnfitentī: add **Messalīnae**. **cōnfitentī** is dative singular of the present participle of **cōnfiteor** ('I confess'); the dative is used because Claudius' ears were not closed *to* her, i.e. Claudius listened *to* her.

6 **Narcissus**: the most powerful of Claudius' freedmen, the secretary in charge of his correspondence.

7 **occāsiōnēs**: opportunities of convincing Claudius of Messalina's guilt.
Caesar: Claudius.

Ostiam: see Section II, line 13. Students may need to remind themselves of why Claudius was at Ostia.

8 **duās eius paelicēs**: either 'his two concubines' or 'two of his concubines'. These were freedwomen, kept by the emperor as his mistresses. Tacitus takes it for granted that the emperor would have mistresses. For the double standard with regard to male and female sexual morality see the note on Section I, line 4.

9 **Calpurnia**: nothing is known about this woman.

10 **sēcrētum**: here = 'a secret interview'.

nūpsisse Messalīnam Siliō: notice the word order. The usual word order in Latin would be **Messalīnam Siliō nūpsisse** (in direct speech, **Messalīna Siliō nūpsit**: subject, object, verb). The effect of this departure from the norm (hyperbaton) could be to attract the attention of the listener (Claudius), or to delay the shocking revelation of who has married whom. **exim**: it is clear that this takes place while Claudius is still at Ostia. Either Narcissus and the two concubines were there with Claudius all the time, or Narcissus has quickly brought the girls from Rome. Tacitus does not provide these details, which would slow down the narrative.

12-13 **ciērī Narcissum postulat**: presumably part of Narcissus' plan - he has told Calpurnia to say this.

13 **quī**: 'and he', i.e. Narcissus. The relative pronoun is often used in Latin to connect a sentence to the previous one (connecting relative).

discidium: a shocking word to use here as there has been no formal divorce. Divorce could be initiated by one partner, either husband or

wife. By marrying a new husband, Messalina could be regarded as divorcing Claudius.

- 14** **populus et senātus et mīlitēs**: the people, the Senate and the soldiers, i.e. the whole population of Rome except the emperor himself. **mīlitēs** means the Praetorian Guard. The Praetorian Guard was the emperor's bodyguard. Its job was to protect the emperor and his family, avert plots against the emperor, and suppress disturbances. It was important for a new emperor to gain and retain the support of the praetorians. The praetorians had chosen Claudius to become emperor after the murder of Caligula. They were based in a permanent camp in the northeast of the city.

mātrimōnium Siliī vīdit populus et senātus et mīlitēs: notice the unusual word order; an example of hyperbaton. The three subjects have been postponed to the end of the sentence, after the verb. The effect may be to draw attention to the three delayed subjects. Tacitus emphasises that the whole city knows by separating out the three elements. Narcissus mentions the three groups in what Claudius would regard as ascending order of importance.

- 14-15** **nisi ... agis, tenet urbem marītus**: the present tenses instead of the usual future perfect and future give a sense of urgency and immediacy. The present tense is used idiomatically in the protasis of conditionals to express threat or warning. Its use in the apodosis is particularly striking.

- 15** **tenet urbem marītus**: another example of unusual word order in Narcissus' speech. Students could be asked to rearrange these three words in the more regular order: **marītus urbem tenet** (subject, object, verb). Again the effect is to draw attention (of both Claudius and the reader/listener) to the words, and also to emphasise the final word, **marītus**.

marītus: Silius.

Discussion

Tacitus now makes it clear that Claudius' freedmen believed that Silius was intending to supplant Claudius. The power and influence of Narcissus and the other imperial freedmen were dependent on the emperor's favour, so they had much to lose if the emperor were overthrown. The most important factor, it seems, was to try to avert a meeting between Messalina and Claudius. They feared that Messalina would be able to exploit Claudius' gullibility and weakness of will, either by convincing him of her innocence or even persuading him to forgive her if she confessed. Teachers could tell students that Claudius was notorious for being susceptible to the pleas and persuasion of his wives. Narcissus' plan to use the two concubines as intermediaries is not explained by Tacitus. Students could be invited to speculate about his

motives. He may have thought that Claudius would be more likely to believe women who enjoyed his intimacy but had no political advantage to gain. Or he may have been protecting himself - an attack on Messalina could be dangerous.

Questions

1. Study lines 2-6 (**spem ... essent**). What do you learn about the relationship between Claudius and Messalina?
2. Study Narcissus' words to Claudius (lines 13-15, **discidium ... maritus**). How does Tacitus' style of writing convey a sense of urgency?
3. Narcissus, Claudius' freedman, plays a crucial role. Make notes on your impressions of Narcissus. You could consider:
 - What methods does he use?
 - Why does he not confront Claudius directly?
 - What is his relationship with Claudius?
 - What are his motives?

Section V Claudius seeks advice (*Annals* 11.31)

- .
- 1 **vocat**: the subject is Claudius
 - 2 **eō locūtō**: in a sentence omitted from this abbreviated version Lusus Geta confirms Narcissus' story.
 - 2-3 **cēterī certātīm circumstrepunt**: The glossary gives 'shout around' or 'make a noise around' for **circumstrepō**. **certātīm** can be translated as 'eagerly', but perhaps the translator should try to retain the sense of 'in rivalry' (**certātīm** is cognate with **certō**, 'I compete'). A literal translation would thus be, 'The rest shout around in rivalry'. Perhaps 'The rest surrounded him, vying with each other in their insistence'. The consonants *c* and *t* are prominent. Perhaps read the phrase aloud and ask students for ideas about the effect of the alliteration:
 - Does it draw attention to these words?
 - Does it highlight the confusion?
 - Does it mimic the harsh sound of the shouting?
 - 3 **circumstrepunt ut īret**: **circumstrepunt** is followed by an indirect command (**ut** with subjunctive verb), i.e. 'They shout out, telling him to ... ' or 'They loudly insist that ... '.

castra: the praetorians had a permanent camp in the northeast of Rome.

- 4 **sēcūrītātī suae:** this is the third occurrence of **sēcūrītās**. Perhaps ask students to choose the most appropriate meaning to fit the context: (a) 'freedom from anxiety'; (b) 'carelessness' or 'recklessness'; (c) 'safety' or 'security'. Check that students understand the link between visiting the praetorian camp and Claudius' safety. If necessary, remind them of the emperor's dependence on the support of the Praetorian Guard. (See the note on Section IV line 14.)
- 5-6 **interrogābat an ... an: an ... an** = 'whether ... whether'. Claudius' two questions are not alternatives.

Discussion

Focus first on establishing the importance of the Praetorian Guard to the security of the emperor. This is why Lusius Geta, the commander of the praetorians, is the first of his loyal advisers from whom Claudius seeks advice (**praesertim**, and he speaks first). This also explains why the advisers agree on insisting loudly that Claudius' first priority should be to ensure the loyalty of the praetorians by visiting their camp in person. The final sentence gives a vivid picture of the emperor's state of mind. The most telling detail is the repetition of the same two questions (**identidem**, reinforced by the imperfect tense of **interrogābat**) - Claudius is not just asking for clarification of the situation, he is in a state of panic and bewilderment. Is this a credible depiction of shock? Or is Tacitus presenting Claudius as generally feeble and slow-witted?

Questions

How does Tacitus present Claudius in this section? Look particularly at the final sentence.

Section VI The wedding party (*Annals* 11,31)

Meanwhile Messalina and Silius continue celebrating their marriage. They hold a party in which they pretend to harvest grapes and they and their guests dress up as followers of Dionysus.

- 1** **at:** marks a change of scene. The focus is now on Messalina and Silius in Rome. 'Meanwhile' would be a suitable translation.
luxū: the ablative expresses the area in which Messalina is uncontrolled, 'in her extravagance', 'in her over-indulgence'. As often, **luxus** has a derogatory tone, especially when combined with **solūtiōr**.
numquam solūtiōr luxū: this phrase sets the tone for the wild scene that follows, whetting the interest of the reader or listener.
adultō autumnō: autumn was the time when the grapes were harvested.
- 2** **simulācrum vīndēmiaē:** this was an imitation grape-harvest, not a real one.
per domum: *all over* her house (and grounds, as becomes clear in line 7).
fluēbat vīnum: presumably, the wine being drunk would be from previous vintages, not the grape juice that is being pressed.
- 3-7** **fēminae ... chorō:** before tackling this long sentence, students will need some information about Dionysiac celebrations and accoutrements. Teachers could either provide this information or set the students a research task.
- Dionysus (Latin: Bacchus) was the god of wine, and therefore the appropriate god to be worshipped at the time of the grape-harvest. Dionysiac rites were primarily a Greek phenomenon, although the cult had been introduced into Rome from South Italy and Etruria, and was there known as the Bacchanalia. In 186 BC the Senate banned the Bacchanalia from Rome and Italy. In Greek cities female worshippers of Dionysus, known as Maenads or Bacchantes, would go out into the mountains to take part in the Dionysiac ritual. This involved a temporary freedom from convention and inhibition. The women wore their hair loose and dressed in animal skins (fawn or panther). Then during the night, to the accompaniment of high-pitched music, they danced themselves into a frenzy. The dance involved headshaking, jumping and running. Maenads are depicted wearing garlands of ivy and carrying a thyrsus, a rod (either a branch from a tree or a stalk of fennel) wreathed in ivy or vine leaves and tipped with a pine cone. A touch of the thyrsus was believed to induce Dionysiac frenzy. Maenads were a popular subject in Greek poetry and painting, and it is difficult to separate reality from myth and imagination, especially as non-

literary sources are lacking. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Maenads are depicted tearing animals apart and eating raw meat.

If not part of the research task, it would be helpful to show students some images of Maenads from Greek vase-paintings or Roman wall-paintings. Dionysus was also the god of drama. In 5th century BC Athens tragedies and comedies were performed by actors and a chorus of singers and dancers at festivals in honour of Dionysus.

Research questions could include:

- What was the Roman and Greek name for the god of wine?
- What were female followers of the wine god called? How did they dress and behave?
- Find a picture of a female follower of the wine-god, either from a Greek vase-painting or a Roman wall-painting.
- What was a thyrsus?
- What was the link between the wine god and drama?
- Explain the significance of **cothurni** and the **chorus**.

See *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. maenads.

3 **pellibus accinctae**: female followers of Bacchus, known as Maenads or Bacchantes, sometimes dressed in animal skins.

4 **ut**: here = 'as, like'.

sacrificantēs: in poetry and painting, e.g. Euripides' *Bacchae*, Maenads are depicted tearing animals apart and eating raw meat. This, however, is myth. The women at Messalina's party are pretending to be Maenads. Was a fake sacrifice part of the fantasy? Or did the women pretend to be tearing animals apart in a sort of mime? Or is the reference to sacrifice just part of the simile? Tacitus does not say that they sacrificed, just that they were like Maenads performing a sacrifice.

īnsānientēs: ecstatic frenzy was part of the Dionysiac ritual.

Bacchae: female followers of Bacchus, Bacchantes or Maenads.

ipsa: Messalina.

crīne flūxō: aristocratic Roman women normally wore their high piled up high in elaborate hairstyles. Bacchantes, in contrast, were depicted with long, flowing hair.

5 **thyrsus**: a rod (either a branch from a tree or a stalk of fennel) wreathed in ivy or vine leaves, and tipped with a pine cone, which was carried by followers of Dionysus. A touch of the thyrsus was believed to induce Dionysiac frenzy.

hederā vīctus: lit. 'bound with ivy', i.e. he was wearing a garland of ivy on his head. A suitable translation would be 'garlanded with ivy'.

6 **cothurnōs**: high, thick-soled boots, worn by tragic actors. Dionysus was the god of theatre as well as wine.

īaciēbat caput: headshaking was part of the dancing involved in Dionysiac ritual

strepente ... procācī chorō: ablative absolute with a present participle.

strepente circum: an echo of **circumstrepunt** in the previous section (Section V, line 3). Teachers could ask students: 'Is there any significance in the repetition, or is it to be explained as accidental?'

Perhaps the echo might serve to remind the reader or listener of simultaneous events at Ostia, and the danger looming for Silius and Messalina. Or it may bring out the contrast between the frivolity of their behaviour and the seriousness of their situation.

circum: adverbial. Translate as 'all around' or 'around him'.

chorō: the theatrical allusion continues with this reference to the chorus, who sang and danced in a Greek tragedy. There could also be a reference to a Roman wedding ceremony. After the wedding, the bridegroom's male friends followed the bride and bridegroom to the bridegroom's home, singing songs with sexual references. This would explain the choice of the adjective **procācī**.

6-7 **cothurnōs ... chorō:** notice the alliteration of *c* in these lines. Read the lines aloud and ask students what effect they think the alliteration produces. Does it draw attention to the words? Or does it imitate the harsh sounds of the singing and dancing?

7-9 **ferunt ... ātrōcem:** the initial reading aloud with careful phrasing and pauses will help students break down this complex sentence. Then each phrase could be repeated aloud, followed by linguistic and comprehension questions. For example:

- **ferunt:** What did people say? What do you expect to follow, in English and in Latin? (Answer: 'that'; accusative and infinitive.)
- Now look for the accusative noun and the infinitive in the rest of the sentence to find out who the sentence is about and what they were doing. (Answer: **Vettium Valentem; respondisse**.)
- **cum in praealtam arborem ... ascendisset:** How would you translate **cum** here? (Hint: notice the form of the verb at the end of the clause.)
- What had Vettius Valens done? What does the phrase **per lasciviam** tell us about his reasons for doing this?
- **cēterīs interrogantibus:** What were other people doing meanwhile? What case is **cēterīs interrogantibus**? Translate the phrase.
- **quid aspiceret:** What question were people asking Vettius Valens?
- **respondisse:** After he was asked this question, what did he do? Check: can you explain why the infinitive form of the verb is used.
- **tempestātem ab Ostiā ātrōcem:** Remember that the question was 'What do you see?' So, Vettius Valens' answer would begin, in direct speech, 'I see'. However, Tacitus omits the Latin word for 'I see' (in indirect speech, 'he replied that he saw'). Pick out the Latin

noun that tells you what Vettius Valens saw. What adjective describes it? Where was it coming from?

- 7 **ferunt**: 'they say', introducing an indirect statement. Tacitus uses this 3rd person plural without a noun or pronoun when he is reporting a story he has heard and does not want to or cannot name his source.
Vettium Valentem: Vettius Valens was an eminent doctor, who was also alleged to have been one of Messalina's lovers.
- 8 **per lasciviam**: 'as a joke', 'for amusement'. **per** + accusative here = 'for, for the sake of'.
- 9 **ab Ostiā**: normally, with the name of towns, the ablative is used without a preposition to indicate movement away from. The inclusion of **ab** means 'from the area of'.
- 9-10 **sīve... seu**: equivalent to **sīve ... sīve** or **seu ... seu**. It is typical of Tacitus to vary his vocabulary (**variatio**). The effect may be to draw attention to the two explanations, particularly the second one. Note that these explanations are Tacitus' comment, appended to Vettius' words - the reported speech ends at **ātrōcem**.
- 10 **coeperat ea speciēs**: *Lit.* 'that sight had begun', i.e. 'that sight had begun to appear'. **speciēs** refers to the storm, the thing which was seen. This is the literal explanation - Vettius Valens really had seen a storm brewing in the direction of Ostia.
lāpsa vōx: 'a casual remark', lit. 'a remark having slipped [out]'. The singular **vōx** is regularly used to denote the sound made, 'remark' or 'words'. This is the second, metaphorical explanation. Vettius Valens meant that a metaphorical storm, i.e. trouble, was brewing in Ostia and was coming their way. **forte** and **lāpsa** show that Vettius Valens was not deliberately issuing a warning.
- 10-11 **postea in praesāgium vertit**: the subject of **vertit** is **vōx**. Later events made it seem that Vettius' words had been prophetic.

Discussion

Messalina and Silius celebrate their wedding by throwing a party. Since it is autumn, the party has a grape-harvest theme, and the partygoers dress up as followers of Dionysus and pretend to make wine. The description of the frivolous celebrations of Messalina and Silius forms a strong contrast with the seriousness of the situation in Ostia. Students could be asked to consider why Tacitus describes the festivities at such length. Possible answers could include: to show the frivolity of Messalina and Silius; to point out their lack of awareness of the danger they are in; to raise the question of whether there was a serious attempt at a political coup; to entertain his readers with a vivid description of an extravagant and exotic party. Discussion of how Tacitus highlights Messalina and Silius' ignorance of the impending danger can lead on to the subject of dramatic irony: the reader or listener knows that

Messalina and Silius' marriage has been disclosed to Claudius and that preparations are in progress for Claudius to visit the Praetorian Guard, but Messalina and Silius themselves are ignorant of events at Ostia. This adds to the suspense and the sense the reader has of imminent danger - a feeling Tacitus exploits at the end with the comment that Vettius' remark about the impending storm of Claudius' anger proved to be prophetic.

Another aspect to examine is Tacitus' descriptive technique. Students could be asked to pick out details that help the reader or listener form a picture in their imagination of what is happening. As well as visual details, there are lots of references to vigorous movement, and some reference to sound, accompanied by harsh alliteration of *c* (**strepente circum procācī chorō**, lines 6-7).

Questions

1. What do you think is the effect of describing the party at such length? You may be able to think of more than one possible answer.
2. How does Tacitus bring his description of the party to life? Consider visual details, descriptions of movement, and references to sound. Support your ideas with quotation of Latin phrases with English translation.
3. How would you describe the mood that Tacitus creates in this section? Does the mood change at all? Pick out some key words and phrases in Latin, with English translation, as evidence for your ideas.

Section VII (*Annals* 11.32,34)

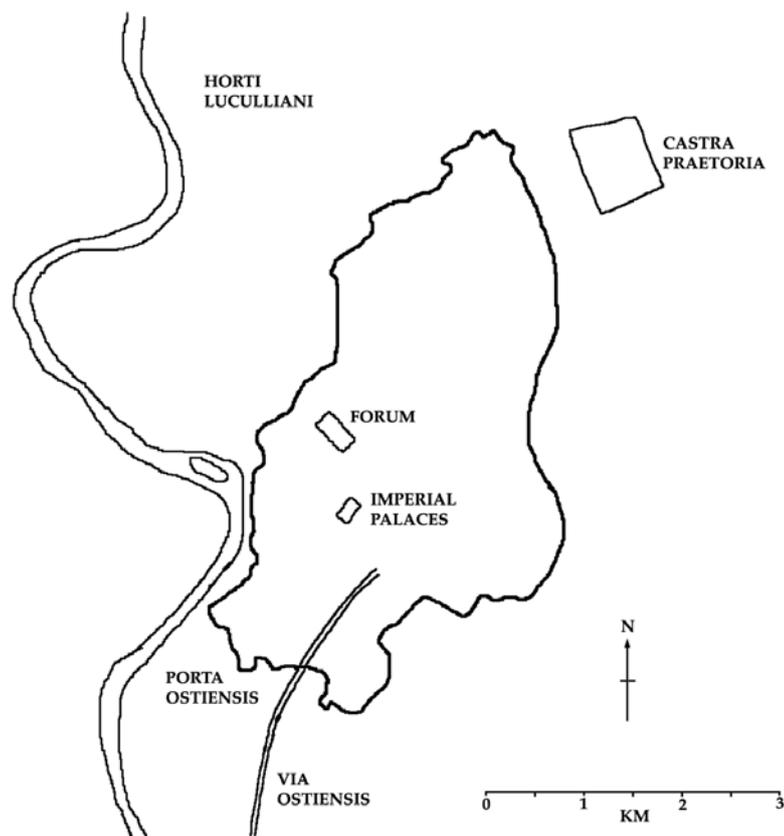
Messalina and Silius receive the news that Claudius knows everything and is coming to exact revenge. They part: Silius goes to the forum pretending that he is not afraid; Messalina goes first to the gardens of Lucullus, then decides to go to meet Claudius, sending their children on in advance.

- 1 rumor:** almost a personification. Poetic.
- 2-3 quī ... adferrent:** 'to ... report [that]'. The subjunctive verb in the relative clause expresses purpose. **adferre** = 'to report'. Cf. **ferunt** in Section VI, line 7. Perhaps approach this by asking students to identify the case of **Claudium** and the form of the verbs **cognōvisse** and **venire**. This should help them recognise the indirect statements dependent on **adferrent**. Ask students to identify the tenses of the two infinitives. What is the difference in meaning between the perfect infinitive and

the present infinitive? Ensure that the translation accurately reflects this difference in tense: 'Claudius has found out ... and he is coming'.

- 3 **prōmptum ultiōnī**: refer back to Section V, lines 3-4. Claudius' advisers have told him to go straight to the praetorian camp and take care of his security before thinking about vengeance. Do students have any ideas to explain the discrepancy? Possible explanations could include:
- Tacitus has made a mistake and not noticed the discrepancy.
 - Rumour has altered the facts.
 - Claudius has changed his mind.
 - To make the story more exciting, Tacitus has chosen to focus on Messalina's fear and her reaction, so he exaggerates the immediate threat to her.
- 4 **Lūculliānōs in hortōs**: the preposition is sandwiched between the adjective and the noun. The gardens of Lucullus were a large park to the north of the centre of Rome originally owned by the wealthy aristocrat Lucius Licinus Lucullus (c. 114-57 BC). (See the map below, which can also be found in the Student Study Book, Section VIIa.) Messalina had recently acquired these gardens after contriving the death of their previous owner, Valerius Asiaticus, by getting someone to bring a false charge against him.

Rome



dissimulāndō metuī: **dissimulāndō** is a gerundive, in agreement with **metuī**. The dative of the gerundive expresses purpose, 'for fear being concealed', i.e. 'to conceal his fear' or 'to pretend that he was not afraid'. Tacitus frequently uses the dative case to express purpose, especially in a noun and gerundive phrase.

forum: students could be asked to suggest why by going to the forum Silius would be concealing his fear. Clearly the forum was a very public place, the centre of business and politics. As consul designate, soon to take office, Silius was a prominent figure, and it is likely that he would normally spend his mornings in the forum attending to public business. So, Silius was acting as normal. Perhaps he wanted people to think that he was innocent. Or he may have wanted to be seen as acting in a dignified way, even if he was going to be caught and punished. Or he may even have thought he still had a chance of pulling off the coup.

5 **illa:** 'she', i.e. Messalina.

rēs adversae: *lit.* 'hostile things'. Encourage students to suggest a more natural English phrase e.g. 'dangerous situation', 'disaster'.

aspicī ā marītō: refer students back to Section IV lines 5-6 to explain why Messalina attached such importance to being seen by Claudius.

quod: there are two possible interpretations of **quod** here.

(i) neuter nominative singular form of the relative pronoun, referring to the whole idea contained in the previous clause, **īre ... marītō**.

(ii) a conjunction = 'because'.

(i) is preferable, because one might expect a subjunctive verb with the latter analysis, as the reason is being reported as Messalina's.

6 **cōnsilium:** here = 'ability to plan', 'judgement'.

7 **subsidiū:** here = 'means of salvation', 'lifeline'.

mīsitque ut: mittō + ut and a subjunctive verb = 'send orders that', introducing an indirect command.

8 **Britannicus:** son of Claudius and Messalina, about six years old. See the introduction above.

Octāvia: daughter of Claudius and Messalina, about seven years old. Tacitus does not say where the children were at the time - clearly not with Messalina.

9 **tribus omnīnō comitantibus:** the wife of the emperor would generally have a much larger entourage. In a sentence omitted from this extract, Tacitus has said that the rest (presumably the guests at the party) slipped away, soldiers arrived and arrested anyone they found hiding or in the streets.

10 **per urbem:** i.e. she walked from the gardens of Lucullus in the north of the city to the *Porta Ostiensis* in the south, at which point she climbed on to a garden refuse cart. A suitable translation of **per** here would be 'the full length of' or 'right through'.

pedibus: Messalina would not be used to travelling on foot through the streets of Rome. Normally she would be carried in a litter.

vehiculō quō: the ablative without a preposition = 'on a cart on which'.

- 11 **Ostiēsem viam:** the **via Ostiēnsis**, the road leading from Rome to Ostia. Check that students remember why she has taken this route - it is the road on which Claudius will travel from Ostia to Rome.
- 12 **civibus:** potentially ambiguous, but context makes it clear that the meaning is 'in the citizens' (not 'for the citizens').

Annals 11. 33-34

At this point a section of Tacitus' text has been cut from the extract set for examination. Here is a brief summary.

The narrative switches back to Claudius and the situation at Ostia, where it had broken off at the end of Section 5. Narcissus takes charge of the situation. He and others lacked confidence in the commander of the Praetorian Guard, Geta, so Narcissus proposed that Claudius' only hope of retaining power was to hand over command of the troops to one of his freedmen. He volunteered himself. Then, so that Claudius did not change his mind on the journey back to Rome, he sat beside him in the carriage. Claudius veered between condemning his wife's conduct and sentimentally reminiscing about their relationship.

- 14 **clāmitābat:** **clāmitō** is the frequentative form of **clāmō**. Cf. **ventitat** in Section I line 9. The force of the frequentative can be insistence as well as frequency; perhaps both ideas are present here. The imperfect tense adds to the idea of repeated, insistent demands. Encourage students to come up with a translation which combines both ideas, e.g. 'she kept on shouting insistently'.
- clāmitābatque ut audīret:** **clāmitābat** introduces an indirect command with **ut** + subjunctive verb; 'she kept on crying out that he should hear' or 'she kept on shouting, telling him to listen to'.
- 15 **obstrepuit:** add **Messalinae** or **eī**. **obstrepō** takes the dative.
- statim constituit:** having just said that Messalina has lost the ability to plan, Tacitus says that she straightaway made a decision. She has just gone (or set off for? Tacitus does not make it clear whether she changed her mind before she got there) to the gardens of Lucullus, then changes her mind and goes to meet Claudius at the opposite end of the city. How is this apparent contradiction to be explained? Is Tacitus saying that Messalina lost the ability to think rationally, and now is acting on instinct - doing what she always does and relying on her ability to manipulate her husband? Alternatively, **cōnsilium eximerent** could

mean that the hostile turn of events took away her ability to plan in the sense that she did not have time to make proper plans, so she made an instant decision without weighing up her options. In the end, it comes to the same thing - Messalina relied on instinct.

referens: referō here = 'recall' i.e. 'reminding Claudius of'.

16 **cōdicillōs**: several wax writing tablets tied together to make a notebook.

libīdinum indicēs: in apposition to **cōdicillōs**, 'as proof of her immorality'. Tacitus does not make clear whether these writing tablets are some kind of proof of Messalina's adultery or simply a list of names or accusations written down by Narcissus to impress Claudius with his wife's guilt. The plural **libīdinum** could refer to several different love-affairs or to several instances of her adultery with Silius.

16-17 **quibus ... āverteret**: the subjunctive verb in the relative clause expresses purpose. **quibus** is ablative. *Lit.* 'with which to distract'.

vīsūs: plural noun for singular, as often in Latin writers; 'gaze, attention'. Students could be asked: 'What was Narcissus' purpose in handing over the tablets to Claudius?'

17 **Caesaris**: the emperor, Claudius.

nec multō post: multō is ablative, 'not later by much', i.e. not much later.

ingredientī: add **Claudiō**.

18 **offerēbantur: offerō** = 'bring before', 'bring to meet'. The imperfect tense could indicate repeated attempts or an action which was attempted but not completed. Narcissus was too quick for them.

Discussion

At some point, either while reading this section or after completing the first reading, refer to the plan of Rome and get students to trace Messalina's journey. We do not know her starting point, because we do not know where the party was held, or whether she and Silius had gone somewhere else after the party. However, the gardens of Lucullus are to the north of the centre of Rome and the Ostiensis porta, where Claudius would arrive from Ostia, to the south, so Messalina seems to have been criss-crossing the whole city in her panic.

Tacitus says that Messalina acted instinctively (**rēs adversae cōsilium eximerent**, lines 5-6). She had two weapons: her husband's susceptibility to her pleas and their children. **quod saepe eī fuerat subsidium** (line 7), which may be Tacitus' report of Messalina's motive or his own comment, shows that she had been successful in the past in winning him over: incidentally, **saepe** indicates that she had frequently had reason to save herself in this way. Accordingly, she hastened to meet Claudius face to face and arranged for the children to be there, so that she could appeal to him as the mother of his

children. Tacitus does not report what she said, but the use of the frequentative **clāmitābatque** (line 14) and of the imperfect tense suggests the loud, insistent nature of her demands. Throughout, Tacitus' language emphasises the relationships she appeals to in her attempt to manipulate Claudius: (**maritō**, line 6; **patris**, line 8; **Octāviae et Britannicī mātrem**, line 14).

The description of her departure from the city emphasises her abandonment and degradation. All but three of her companions have deserted her (**tam repēns erat sōlitūdō**, lines 9-10) and the citizens who see her view her with disgust rather than pity. At first she has to walk, which was considered beneath the dignity of a well-born woman, then she travels in a refuse wagon; perhaps there is a suggestion that she is like the rubbish being ejected from the city.

Narcissus' intention was to divert Claudius' attention away from his family. He was determined that the sight of Claudius' wife and her mention of their children should be trumped by reminders of her adultery, not only with Silius but with many others.

Questions

1. On the plan of Rome on page xxx trace Messalina's journey from the gardens of Lucullus to her meeting with Claudius.
2. Consider the way Tacitus presents Messalina. You could think about her actions, her motives and what she says, the comments that Tacitus makes and the picture he gives of Messalina's journey.
3. **flāgitiōrum dēfōrmitās** (lines 12-13). Consider the following translations of this phrase: 'her atrocious crimes' (Yardley); 'the appalling nature of her scandalous behaviour'; 'the monstrosity of her immorality'; 'the disgracefulness of her crimes'. In weighing up the merits of these translations you could ask yourself:
 - Does the translation retain the grammatical structure (two nouns)?
 - Is there an attempt to convey the force of the repetition of the letter *f*?
 - **dēfōrmitās** also means 'ugliness' - do any of the translations capture this connotation?

Section VIII Narcissus takes charge (*Annals* 11.35,37)

- 1 **mīrum inter haec silentium Claudiī:** add **erat**. Notice the word order. The separation of adjective and noun (**mīrum ... silentium**), with the adjective coming first, draws attention to **mīrum**. Ask students why Claudius' silence is described as 'strange' or 'remarkable'. Is this Tacitus' comment?
inter haec: literally 'among these things'. A suitable translation would be: 'While this was happening'.
- 1-2 **omnia libertō oboediēbat:** the vocabulary highlights the fact that Claudius' relationship with Narcissus is an inversion of the norm. Students could be asked, 'What do you think is the effect of using **libertō** rather than referring to Narcissus by name?'
omnia: the accusative plural = 'in everything'.
- 2 **quī:** connecting relative pronoun, 'and he'. The antecedent is **libertō**.
in castrīs: the action has now shifted to the camp of the Praetorian Guard in the northeast of Rome. A few lines in which Tacitus describes Claudius' journey to the camp have been omitted in this extract. Direct students to the Praetorian camp on the plan of the city.
- 3 **praemonente Narcissō:** students may need to be reminded that Narcissus had asked for temporary command of the Praetorian Guard and Claudius had given it to him. (See the summary of cc.33-34 above, after the note on Section VII line 12.) Probably **praemonente** here signifies that Narcissus warned the soldiers that a crisis was imminent, before leaving the emperor to supply the details. Alternatively, Narcissus could be giving advice to Claudius on his speech to the soldiers.
- 4 **continuus ... clāmor:** add **erat**.
- 4-5 **nōmina ... flāgitantium:** presumably Narcissus and Claudius had said only that there was a plot, without revealing the names of the conspirators. Narcissus may have kept Messalina's name concealed because he was afraid that the soldiers would be overawed by her powerful position and be unwilling to act; once their passions had been roused by general warnings of imminent rebellion against the emperor, they would be less likely to subside when the identities of the conspirators were revealed. Claudius may have been too ashamed to name her and her lover. In a comment omitted from this extract Tacitus says: "he [Claudius] could hardly express his indignation for shame."
- 5 **ductus Silius ad tribūnal:** Tacitus speeds up the action; he omits the arrest of Silius. The **tribūnal** was the raised platform which was a standard feature of the **principia** (headquarters) of a Roman fort; here the commanding officer addressed his soldiers.
- 6 **morās:** the plural could be translated as 'delaying tactics'.

- 6-7 **precātus est ut mors accelerārētur**: Tacitus switches the focus of the narrative from Silius to Messalina without describing Silius' death, and Silius is not mentioned again. However, in a passage that has been omitted here, Tacitus describes the execution of several co-conspirators and lovers of Messalina. The normal penalty for treason against the emperor was beheading. Teachers could ask students: 'What do you think happened to Silius?', then 'Why do you think Tacitus omits a description of his execution?' Perhaps Tacitus wanted to concentrate on the death of Messalina.
- 8 **Lūcullianīs in hortīs**: the preposition is sandwiched between adjective and noun. Students are probably accustomed to this word arrangement by now and it should cause no trouble. Messalina is now in the gardens of Lucullus as her one remaining refuge. Check that students remember that this is where she had originally intended to go (Section VII line 4). Tacitus has not described her journey there from the *via Ostiensis*. This is another example of his tendency to speed up the narrative by leaving gaps.
- 8,9 **prōlātāre, compōnere**: historic infinitives. An infinitive is sometimes used instead of an imperfect tense in descriptions of rapid and lively action. It would be appropriate here to translate **prōlātāre** with a conative sense: 'she tried to ...'.
- 9 **compōnere precēs**: an appeal to Claudius, either written or spoken. If the latter, she was hoping for a meeting with the emperor.
nōnnūllā: this is glossed as 'some', which would be an accurate translation. However, if teachers show students that the word is a compound of **nōn** and **nūllā**, they may prefer to translate it as 'not without' or 'with a certain degree of', or something similar.
spē et irā: this is very economically expressed. Ask students:
 - What was she hoping? (To be pardoned by Claudius.)
 - With whom was she angry? (Narcissus; her accuser(s). Remind students that Narcissus has prevented her appealing to Claudius.)
- 10 **gerēbat**: here = 'displayed'. Students may have met **gerō** in the similar sense of 'wear, put on [clothes]'.
- 10-11 **nisi ...properāvisset, vertisset**: students may need help with the pluperfect subjunctives in the conditional clauses. Comprehension questions with some hints on translation could help, e.g.
 - Tacitus says that if Narcissus had not done something, something else would have happened.
 - Fill in the gap: If Narcissus had not ... ,
 - If Narcissus had not hastened her execution, what would have happened? (Perhaps give a hint here that **perniciēs** is the subject of **vertisset**.)

- 11 **vertisset perniciēs**: better to take **vertisset** as intransitive here with **perniciēs** (nominative singular) as subject. reading **perniciēs** (accusative plural for singular) as the object of **vertisset** is awkward. Tacitus is saying that, unless Narcissus acted fast, he would be the one who was destroyed. Students could be asked to consider the following translations:
 'And had not Narcissus accelerated her death, destruction would have recoiled on the accuser'. (Yardley)
 'Indeed, if Narcissus had not speedily caused her death, the fatal blow would have rebounded on her accuser.' (Grant)
 'If Narcissus had not hastened her killing, ruin would have recoiled upon the accuser.' (Damon)
accūsātōrem: Narcissus.
- 12 **cēnā vīnōque incaluit: incalēscō** (lit. 'grow warm') is used here with a metaphorical meaning, 'to become relaxed, to be soothed, to be mellowed'. Perhaps ask students:
- How did Claudius feel?
 - In what sense did he grow warm - drunk, angry, calm, passionate? (This cannot be answered accurately until the rest of the sentence has been translated.)
 - What had produced this effect on him?
- 13-14 **hōc ... ferunt**: leave the comment in parenthesis until the rest of the sentence has been translated. Students have already met **ferunt** in the sense of 'they say' (Section VI, line 7). A similar procedure will help here. For example:
- **ferunt**: What did people say? What do you expect to depend on **ferunt** (they say), in English and in Latin? (Answer: 'that'; accusative and infinitive.)
 - Now look for the accusative noun and the infinitive in the rest of the sentence to find out who the sentence is about and what they were doing. (Answer: **Claudium; ūsum esse**.)
 - What did Claudius use? (Students may need a reminder that **ūtor** takes the ablative.)
- 14 **ad causam dīcendam**: 'to plead her case', 'to defend herself'. This is precisely what Narcissus has tried to avoid. (See Section IV, lines 4-6.) **ad** + accusative here means 'for the purpose of' and is followed by a noun and gerundive (literally, 'for the sake of the case being pleaded').
- 15-17 **quod ... memoriā**: after the initial reading aloud, this multi-clause sentence can be broken down into short parts for comprehension and translation.
- 15 **quod ubi Narcissus audīvit**: = **ubi Narcissus hoc audīvit**. **quod** is a connecting relative.

- 15-16** **languēscere iram redire amōrem vīdit**: students may need help in construing this. The difficulty lies in the accusative and infinitive dependent on **vīdit** and the absence of a connective between the two accusative and infinitives. A good starting point, as always, is reading aloud with emphasis on phrasing. Then ask a combination of comprehension and linguistic questions, with a few hints. For example:
- We know that Narcissus heard something (**audīvit**). Find the verb that tells you what else he did. (Hint: the main verb is usually at the end of the clause.)
 - Narcissus saw *that* two things were happening? In Latin this is expressed by an accusative and infinitive clause (indirect statement). Find the two accusatives and the two infinitives.
 - What was happening to the anger?
 - What was happening to the love?
 - Whose anger and whose love?

It would be worth spending some time examining the style of these words in some detail, perhaps on first translation or on a later reading. Notice the brevity of the two indirect statements, the unusual word order and the lack of a connective between the two indirect statements (asyndeton). Perhaps start by pointing out the lack of a connective:

- Tacitus could have written **languēscere iram et redire amōrem**. What do you think is the effect of missing out **et**?
- What would be the more usual order of infinitive and noun in an indirect statement? What do you think is the effect of reversing the regular order?

Encourage students to venture their ideas - make it clear that there is no one correct answer. Students will probably come up with a variety of suggestions, e.g. that omitting **et** brings out the contrast between the two statements, the parallel word order vividly shows how love increases as anger decreases, the brevity of expression enhances the contrast, the unusual word order attracts the attention of the reader or listener.

- 16-17** **timēbat ... memoriam**: comprehension and linguistic questions can be used to help students with the final part of the sentence, e.g.
- What emotion did Narcissus feel?
 - Pick out the two accusative nouns that tell you what two things Narcissus was afraid of? Translate them.
 - Which night is being referred to? (Hint: an adjective is describing **noctem**.)
 - What is the memory of? Whose memory is being referred to?
 - Narcissus feared these two things only on the condition that he acted in a certain way. Which two-word clause states this condition?

- Translate **sī morārētur** (Hint: **moror** is a deponent verb, so it has an active meaning.)
 - Tacitus just says 'if he hesitated'. What was it that Narcissus might hesitate to do?
 - Explain in your own words what Tacitus means by 'the next night' and 'the memory of his wife's bedroom'.
- 17 **prōrumpit dēnūntiatque**: historic present tenses and vivid choice of vocabulary.
- 18 **centuriōnibus et tribūnō**: these were the officers stationed at the palace to guard the emperor while he was in residence. A tribune was a higher-ranking officer than a centurion; **quī aderat** suggests that it was only by chance that a tribune was on hand to take responsibility for the killing of Messalina. Note that **aderat** shows that the antecedent of **quī** is **tribūnō** (singular).
exsequī: the use of the infinitive with **dēnūntiō** in an indirect command (instead of **ut** + subjunctive) is rare.
- 18-19 **ita imperātōrem iubēre**: add **dixit**. The infinitive verb and accusative subject, and the colon at the end of the previous sentence, signify that Tacitus is still reporting what Narcissus said. Students have seen several examples of the accusative and infinitive construction. To avoid a mistranslation, teachers could ask:
- What case is **imperātōrem**?
 - What form is the verb?
 - What kind of construction is this?
 - How would you translate it? (Hint: you might need to add something - e.g. 'he said that ...')
- Finally, check comprehension by asking: 'Is Narcissus telling the truth?' Then, 'Why do you think he lied?'

Discussion

Claudius allows Narcissus to take charge, even to the extent of dealing with the Praetorian Guard. Teachers can help students to see that this relationship with his freedman is an inversion of the norm, highlighting Claudius' weakness and lack of resolution. Once he returns home he weakens even more, referring to Messalina as **fēmina misera**, 'the poor woman' (line 13) and Narcissus fears that Claudius' feelings for Messalina may make him lenient.

The main threat to Narcissus is Messalina. He has to get rid of her before she has the chance of appealing to Claudius. After convincing Claudius of Messalina's guilt Narcissus gets the Praetorian Guard on his side. Narcissus is playing a dangerous game; he ran a tremendous risk in ordering Messalina's execution without Claudius' authority. He had to lie to the soldiers because they would not have undertaken such a task without

believing that the order had come from Claudius. The class could speculate about Narcissus' motives - Why did he take such a huge risk? How did he think he could get away with it?

Whereas Silius realised that the situation was hopeless when he saw that Claudius, Narcissus and the Praetorian Guard were all ranged against him, Messalina continued to hope that Claudius would pardon her and that she would be able to take vengeance on Narcissus (**spē et irā**, line 9) against whom her anger was particularly directed. Tacitus intimates that without Narcissus' intervention Messalina would have succeeded in winning over Claudius - at least this is what Narcissus fears. In considering the relationship between Claudius and Messalina, teachers could remind students of the age difference between the pair and the fact that she has appealed to him successfully before. Both Silius and Messalina pray, Silius for death to come quickly (**mors accelerārētur**, lines 6-7), Messalina for life to be prolonged (**prōlātāre vītam**, line 7). The contrast between them is accentuated by the linguistic balance and antithesis. The effect is to highlight Messalina's arrogance (**tantam superbiam**, lines 9-10); **etiam tum** expresses Tacitus' incredulity.

Lines 17-19 (**igitur ... iubēre**) are a good choice for some stylistic analysis. Tacitus is describing how Narcissus acts once he has considered the consequences of delaying. The verbs (**prōrumpit dēnūntiatque**) are emphasised by graphic word choice, unusual word order (verb before indirect object) and the historic present tense - the overall effect is to speed up the narrative and suggest Narcissus' sudden explosion into action. The regular order is also reversed in **exsequī caedem**; the effect is to put emphasis on the final word, **caedem**.

Questions

1. Consider the part played by Narcissus in the events leading up to the capture and death of Silius and Messalina. Why do you think he took Claudius to the Praetorian camp and dealt first with Silius? What dangers were there in Narcissus' situation and how did he avoid them? Why did he have to act so quickly? What risks did he take?
2. What does this passage add to your impression of Claudius? You could consider his relationship with Narcissus and his feelings for his wife.
3. Study lines 17-19 (**igitur ... iubēre**). How, by his style of writing, does Tacitus convey the speed and energy of Narcissus' response to the situation? You could consider:
 - choice of detail
 - choice of vocabulary
 - brevity of expression
 - word choice
 - word order

Section IX The death of Messalina (*Annals* 11.37-38)

Narcissus sends a freedman, who finds Messalina in the gardens of Lucullus, with her mother, Lepida. Lepida urges Messalina to commit suicide, but without success.

Suddenly the soldiers arrive. Then, finally, Messalina takes the dagger and makes a faltering attempt to stab herself. As she does so, she is killed by the tribune.

1 **missus**: add **est**.

ūnus ē libertīs: **ūnus ē** = 'one of', *lit.* 'one out of'; one of the imperial freedmen.

The remainder of this sentence has been omitted in the extract set for the examination; in it, Tacitus adds that the freedman was sent to prevent Messalina's escape and see that the order was carried out. Probably Narcissus trusted a freedman to obey his orders more than he trusted the army officers, and he may have been worried that at the last moment the soldiers would shrink from the task.

2 **humī fūsam**: 'sprawled on the ground' or 'prostrate on the ground'.

3 **māter Lepida**: Domitia Lepida was the great-niece of the emperor Augustus and cousin of Agrippina, Nero's mother; Agrippina later engineered Lepida's death.

flōrentī: students may need help in recognising the dative form of the present participle. They could be asked: 'At what time of Messalina's life had Lepida been on bad terms with her daughter?' Explain that the present participle denotes an event or action that happens at the same time as the main verb, so both can describe something that happens in the past. Students can then be encouraged to translate the present participle as 'while/when she was ...'.

haud concors fuerat: this was because Messalina had brought about the death of her mother's second husband, Appius Silanus. Messalina had tried to seduce her step-father, but he rejected her advances, and, in retaliation, she had him killed. With Narcissus' help, she plotted to have Silanus executed on a false charge. **haud concors** is therefore an understatement: an example of litotes. **concors** is glossed as 'in harmony with, on friendly terms with'. Students could be asked to break this compound word down into its parts - **con** (with) + **cor** (heart) - and asked to find derivatives in English, e.g. concord.

4 **necessitātibus**: the plural here can be translated as 'time of need' or 'crisis'.

3-4 **flōrentī filiae haud concors fuerat suprēmīs eius necessitātibus ad misericordiam versa**: notice the word order. The two pairs of balanced phrases bring out the contrast between past and present circumstances (**flōrentī** balances **suprēmīs ... necessitātibus**) and Lepida's feelings (**haud concors** balances **misericiordiam**).

- 5 **suādēbat**: encourage students to consider various ways of translating the imperfect tense. It could be translated either as conative ('she tried to persuade her') or iterative ('she kept urging her').
- 5-6 **trānsiisse vītam neque aliud quaerendum**: the colon after **opperirētur** and the accusative (**vītam**) and infinitive (**trānsiisse**) indicate that Tacitus is continuing to report what Lepida said. Students have met examples of extended indirect speech. As a reminder, teachers could refer back to Section II lines 4-8 (and see the note *ad loc.*), Section III lines 1-8, Section IV lines 2-6. Students could be asked:
- What does Lepida say to persuade Messalina not to wait for her executioner?
- quaerendum**: add **esse**.
- 6 **mortem decōram**: it was a widely held Roman belief that suicide was preferable to a dishonourable death. However, the attitude to suicide was not straightforward; whether it was approved or disapproved of depended on two things: motive and manner. Avoidance of shame and dishonour was considered an appropriate motive, for example when an upper-class Roman was condemned to death he was given a chance to commit suicide. Suicide in these circumstances was regarded as an honourable death. Suicide which was the result of a calculated and rational decision was admired more than an impulsive act. The Stoic philosophers, for example, advocated a rational death; famous Stoics who committed suicide were Seneca and Cato.
- 8-9 **cum ... pulsae sunt**: the indicative is used because the main idea is in the **cum** clause (inverse **cum**).
- 9 **venientium**: the genitive of the present participle is used here as a noun, 'of [men] approaching'.
forēs: probably the gate to the garden.
- 11 **quod**: connecting relative pronoun (neuter accusative singular) referring to the dagger (**ferrum**).
iugulō aut pectorī: '(now) to her throat, (now) to her breast'. The connective **aut** suggests Messalina's fumbling attempts and indecisiveness.
per trepidātiōnem: 'in terror'.

Discussion

The chief focus of discussion will be the way Messalina is presented as she faces death. Students could be asked to look for ways in which Tacitus directs the response of the reader or listener, both by explicit comment and implicitly. The fact that even her own mother urges Messalina to commit suicide reinforces the idea that this would be the honourable course of action. Even at the end, Tacitus continues to attack Messalina's character, accusing her explicitly of cowardice and reminding the reader or listener of her past

depravity (**nihil honestum inerat Messalīnae animō, per libīdinēs corruptō**, lines 6-7). Even when she is finally convinced that there will be no escape, and takes the dagger, she lacks the courage to deliver the fatal blow. The courage and dignity of Silius is a foil to Messalina's weakness and cowardice. Students can be asked whether they feel any pity for Messalina. Tacitus exposes and dwells on her weakness, but does this evoke pity or contempt? What is the effect of the use of the passive voice in line 8, **lacrimae et questūs inritī effundēbantur**? Does this create a distancing effect? What do students feel about Messalina's inability to carry through the attempt at suicide?

This passage lends itself to a study of Tacitus' narrative technique, as suggested in question 3 below. The reader is invited to see Messalina as the freedman does, sprawled on the ground with her mother beside her. Then, her tears and complaints are interrupted by the sudden arrival of the soldiers. The pace of the narrative and the mood now alters, with **cum** (line 8) indicating a change of direction and the forceful noun **impetū** marking the violence to come. Violence continues with the breaking down of the gate. The regular order of subject and verb is reversed (**pulsae sunt forēs adstititque tribūnus**), leading up to the climax of the looming figure of the **tribunus** at the end of the sentence. Tacitus dwells on Messalina's hesitation and weakness. Students could be asked to pick out words and phrases which draw attention to this, e.g. **iugulō aut pectorī**: what does **aut** (rather than **et**) suggest? The brutal economy of the tribune's decisive blow, expressed in just three words, is in stark contrast to Messalina's lengthy fumbling. Students could be asked to notice the vivid historic tense of **transigitur** and the force of the present participle **admovēns** (line 12) - she is struck down at the very moment she is faltering with the dagger.

Questions

1. Examine the way Tacitus presents the final hours and the death of Messalina. What comments does he make on her character? What effect does he achieve by focusing on the role of her mother?
2. Examine how Tacitus contrasts Messalina's behaviour in the face of death with that of Silius. You could consider:
 - where it took place and who was present
 - what they said and how they behaved
 - the length and detail of Tacitus' account
 - any explicit comment made by Tacitus
 - which of them made a better impression on you?
 - did you feel sympathy for either of them?
3. Consider Tacitus' skill in writing a vivid and dramatic narrative. You could include:
 - choice of detail to help the reader or listener picture what is happening in their imagination

- references to sounds
- change of pace and mood (at what point can you detect this?)
- verb tenses
- word order in lines 8-9 (**cum ... tribūnus**)

Section X Claudius is informed of Messalina's death (*Annals* 11,38)

- 1 **nūntiātum est**: impersonal passive, 'it was announced'.
epulanti: ask students 'What was Claudius doing when the news was brought?' If they are unsure about how to translate the present participle, refer back to **flōrenti** (Section IX, line 3).
Messalinam perisse: the message did not specify how she died.
poposcit pōculum: the jingly alliteration draws attention to these words. Presumably, Claudius is asking for a refill, an indication that he is carrying on as normal at a banquet, as the next clause explains.
solita convīviō: the neuter plural accusative of the perfect participle **solita** is used here as a noun, *lit.* 'customary things'. The ablative without a preposition, **convīviō**, expresses place, 'at a banquet'. The literal translation is '[he celebrated] customary things at a banquet', i.e. 'he celebrated in his usual manner at a banquet'.
- 3-4 **odi ... signa dedit**: it is likely that students will not recognise that this is a list of genitive nouns dependent on **signa**. After reading aloud, the teacher could ask:
- What did Claudius not do? [Hint: look at the end of the sentence.]
 - What did he not give?
 - Signs of what?
- odi gaudiī irae trīstītiaē**: the emotions are listed without the usual connective (**aut**), an example of asyndeton. Reading aloud will help students grasp the effect of the asyndeton.
- 4 **dēnique**: here, = 'in short', 'in fact', introducing a summary at the end of a list.
- 5 **filiōs**: Britannicus and Octavia. The masculine plural form is used to refer to a son and a daughter.
- 8 **dēmōvendās**: add **esse**.

Discussion

Tacitus emphasises Claudius' lack of interest and emotion when he is told of Messalina's death, but it is left to the reader or listener to supply an explanation for this apparent indifference. Perhaps look first at his immediate response, then at his behaviour in the following days. When first informed, he displayed no interest - he did not even ask how she had died, but carried on drinking and feasting as usual. Students will have various ideas, perhaps including that he was drunk or shocked or celebrating Messalina's death. In the following few days he displayed no emotion. This is emphasised by **ne ... quidem** at the start, the list of possible emotions, both positive and negative, the contrast with the emotions of Messalina's accusers and his children, the repeated negatives (**nōn cum... nōn cum**), and the chiasmic word arrangement in **laetantēs accūsātōrēs ... filiōs maerentēs**.

Questions

1. How does Tacitus emphasise Claudius' lack of interest and emotion in reaction to hearing the news of Messalina's death?
2. Suggest an explanation (or explanations) for Claudius' behaviour.

General questions

1. Who do you think is more to blame for the adulterous relationship between Silius and Messalina and their subsequent actions? Were they really attempting a political coup? Does Tacitus make it clear where his sympathies lie? Do you think the way Tacitus tells the story manipulates the reader's sympathies?

Teachers can help students to sort out where the initiative lies at key points in the narrative. Tacitus presents Messalina as taking the first steps with Silius as her victim. However, it is Silius who suggests marriage and the removal of Claudius. Although Claudius' advisers take the plot seriously, Tacitus does not present Silius as someone seriously attempting a political coup. It is possible that Tacitus underplays Silius' political ambitions.

Tacitus presents his material from a moral rather than a political perspective. He deplored the decadence of this period, particularly evident in the imperial families, and he portrays Messalina as a prime example of such corruption. Teachers could ask students to look for instances where Tacitus makes explicit judgements on Messalina. There are several of these (Section II lines 11-12, **nōmen enim mātīmōnī**

concupīvit ob magnitudinem infāmiae; Section VIII lines 9-10, **tantam superbiam etiam tum gerēbat**; Section IX lines 6-7, **sed nihil honestum inerat Messalīnae animō, per libīdinēs corruptō**). However, for the most part, Messalina's guilt and Tacitus' attitude to her emerges more from her actions and the way she is depicted, e.g. the complete lack of sympathy for her as she leaves the city; her cowardice in the face of death, contrasted with Silius' acceptance; the almost complete absence of any expression of feeling for her death (with the exceptions of her mother's pity and the final reference to her grieving children). Discussion of this will lead naturally to question 2, whether Tacitus' portrayal is misogynistic.

2. **Presentation of women.** There was a long tradition in Greek and Roman culture of stories showing prejudice against women. Based on your reading of this episode, do you think Tacitus shared this prejudice?
3. **Characters.** The main characters - Messalina, Silius, Claudius, Narcissus - are all vividly drawn. What is your final impression of each of them? How fair and accurate do you think Tacitus' presentation of each of them is?

Messalina, as well as being morally corrupt, is a manipulator, with a good understanding of psychology: she knows that Claudius is too weak to withstand her charms. Silius takes life - and death - as they come; his plot against the emperor was apparently serious, but we are not told whether his main motive was political or sexual. Claudius, who as emperor ought to be the fountainhead of power, is instead weak, unable to make up his mind, unaware of what is happening around him and a prey to stronger influences. Narcissus, whom we might have expected to see as a villain, is placed on the side of moral rectitude, even though he is at the same time protecting his own position. His skill and speed of thought in handling people are remarkable; he stage-manages the downfall of Messalina with supreme efficiency. An interesting point is the great disparity in age between Claudius and Messalina; on 47 AD, when her affair with Silius begins, Messalina was about twenty-seven and Claudius fifty-seven. Students could be asked if this fact affects the way they view Messalina's behaviour. Does it also help to explain Claudius' indulgence towards her?

4. This whole episode describes a struggle for power. Who came out on top and why?

As emperor, Claudius might be expected to exercise supreme power. However, Tacitus presents him as a puppet, manipulated by Messalina

and Narcissus in their struggle for power. In the end Messalina loses because Narcissus has access to Claudius and to the Praetorian Guard and he is prepared to take the risk of ordering the death of Messalina without Claudia's knowledge.

5. **Tacitus as an historian.** If you were an historian trying to reconstruct these events, how much reliance would you put on Tacitus' story? What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of Tacitus as an historian? You could consider: accuracy, use of evidence, clarity, impartiality, style of writing.
6. **Tacitus as a writer.** Which episodes or phrases linger most vividly in your mind after reading this narrative? What do you think are the most striking qualities of Tacitus as a writer?

Activities

- Write about the episode from the point of view of one of the characters in the story: Silius, his wife, Messalina, Lepida, Claudius, Narcissus.
- Imagine that Messalina had the opportunity to be put on trial and defend herself. Compose a speech for her to deliver in her defence. Or, have a mock trial with Messalina, a prosecuting barrister and a defending barrister.