

**scripta 15.5: Suetonius' describes Agrippina's murder**

This text is made up of extracts from Suetonius' biography of Nero, section 34. Nero's relationship with his mother Agrippina is a central part of Suetonius' account: ruthless and ambitious, Agrippina had pushed Nero into power, but he soon tired of her overbearing dominance and decided to kill her. Suetonius lingers (at much greater length than the extracts given below) on the dramatic, deceitful and perverted details of this matricide.

In the passages below, Suetonius describes Nero's decision to murder his mother and his crazed guilt afterwards. Suetonius reminds the reader of the incestuous relationship between mother and son, and the final details focus on Nero's sexual fascination with her body. As you read in Chapter 14, Latin texts often echoed literary predecessors, either within the same genre or beyond it. In Suetonius' text, Nero's decision to kill his mother is reminiscent of the dysfunctional family relationships often present in Greek tragedy: the reference to the Furies shows the influence of this genre. In Greek tragedy, the Furies were terrifying divine beings who came to haunt people who had committed brutal crimes against their families.

His mother kept asking him more pointedly about what he was doing and saying and she kept on taking him to task. Nero found this increasingly heavy going and so he repeatedly exposed her to public resentment, acting as if he was about to step back from his power and go away to Rhodes. Then he stripped her of all her status and power, took away the body guard of Roman and German soldiers and drove her out from his private quarters and his palace on the Palatine Hill.

At last, terrified by her threats and her violent nature, he decided to kill her. He tried to do this three times with poison, but realised that she had defended herself by taking antidotes in advance. Then he prepared ceiling panels which would fall down on top of her as she slept. This plan, however, was not concealed well enough by those who knew about it and so he obtained a collapsible boat and - after faking a reconciliation - in a most charming letter he invited Agrippina to Baiae to join in with his celebrations of the festival of Minerva. He dragged out the party and when she wanted to return to Bauli, he offered her this boat, accompanying her to it cheerfully and even kissing her breasts at the moment of departure.

He stayed awake for the intervening time - greatly on edge - waiting for the end of what he had begun. But when he found out that she had escaped by swimming, at a loss for his next move, he ordered that his mother be killed. Trustworthy sources report actions even worse than these: they say that Nero hurried to inspect the corpse, that he fondled her limbs, that he criticised some parts of her body and praised others. Afterwards, however, although he was fortified by congratulations from the soldiers, senate and Roman people, he was not able to bear his memory of the crime and confessed that he was tormented by his mother's ghost and by the Furies' lashes and their burning torches.

- 1) At the start of this extract, what evidence is there that Nero's relationship with his mother had deteriorated?
- 2) Nero tries to kill his mother in a variety of ways: explain in your own words what these were.
- 3) Suetonius seems to relish the horror of this murder: which moments do you find most horrific and why?
- 4) Using this extract as your evidence, write character descriptions of Nero and Agrippina.

