Romish poison: *Claudius Tiberius Nero*

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Abstract
Early Modern revenge plays in which poison is used as a means of eradicating enemies, family members and acquaintances are numerous, and Italy was a favourite setting for them: Fynes Moryson declares that "the Italyans aboue all other nations, most practise revenge by treasons, and espetially are skillfull in making and giuing poysons", and expressly connects this to Catholicism: "For poysons the Italians skill in making and putting them to vse hath beene long since tryed, to the perishing of kings and Emperours by those deadly potions giuen to them in the very Chalice mingled with the very precious blood of our Redeemer" (Hughes 1903: 405-6). This essay will explore the anonymous *The Tragedy of Claudius Tiberius Nero* (1607), a play including six poisoners who amongst them murder a variety of victims by means which include giving them stale water and poisoned wine, force-feeding, applying a poisoned crown, and poisoning a pomegranate and an apple. *The Tragedy of Claudius Tiberius Nero* shares elements with other plays connecting Italy and poison, but here the setting is specifically a Roman one. This places the emphasis less on Catholicism and more on the setting of the imperial court, allowing the play to offer a searching analysis of court culture with particular attention to the bonds formed between rulers and favourites. In this play, poison becomes a metaphor for an emasculation which is figured as pervasive, contagious and toxic.

Key-words: poison, Jacobean court, Catholicism.

Francis Bacon (1651: 118) calls poisoning "a forraign practice, fit for Rome and her Doctrine", and Italy in general is presented by several Renaissance playwrights as the home of poison in plays as diverse as *Edward II* (where Lightborn learned the art of poisoning in Naples), *Albovine, King of the Lombards* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*. *The Tragedy of Claudius Tiberius Nero*, published for Francis Burton and printed by Edward Allde in 1607, also makes this link. The play

was dedicated by Burton to Sir Arthur Mannering[1], a knight and university graduate described as "a well known figure at the court of James I and a favourite of Prince Henry" (Abbick 1967: iv). No author's name was given, and none has been guessed at, except that a connection with one of the universities has been postulated (Abbick 1967: iii). The unnamed playwright may possibly have been aware that his play contradicted beliefs held by James I regarding tyrants and absolute rule, especially as James believed that "a lawfull King doeth directly differ from a Tyrant" (James I 1616: 493). James clearly described his beliefs on the matter:

> For I doe acknowledge, that the speciall and greatest point of difference that is betwixt a rightfull King and an vsurping Tyrant is in this; That whereas the proude and ambitious Tyrant doeth thinke his Kingdome and people are onely ordeined for satisfaction of his desires and vnreasonable appetites; The righteous and iust King doeth by the contrary acknowledge himselfe to bee ordeined for the procuring of the wealth and prosperity of his people, and that his greatest and principall worldly felicitie must consist in their prosperitie. (pp. 494-5)

The playwright informs us from the very beginning that his play is "of Rome's great Tyrant" (*The Tragedy of Claudius Tiberius Nero*, "Ad Lectores"), and Tiberius is depicted as a tyrant throughout the play: before his death Sejanus addresses Tiberius as a tyrant – "It may be, tyrant?" (V.iv.74) – and delights in relating how he, Sejanus, "o'er reached a tyrant" (V.iv.82) by tricking him into killing his own son. Agrippina, daughter-in-law to Tiberius, defies Tiberius at the moment of her death by not remaining silent: she calls him "fond tyrant", "Nero, the butcher" (V.v.47-9) and "Detested tyrant" (V.v.176). Before Celsus puts a chain around his own neck to strangle himself, he too addresses Tiberius as "tyrant" (V.vii.54). Caligula

[1] We use the spelling in Francis Burton's Front Matter naming Mannering as dedicatee of the play. Sir Arthur Mannering was a graduate of Oxford University; he received his BA degree from Brasenose College 7 July 1598, and his MA 15 June 1601. In 1611 Francis Burton made another dedication using the name of Sir Arthur Mannering in a volume of sermons written by Lancelot Andrews (1555-1626), called *Scala coeli*, which reads: "The right worshipful Sir George Mainwaring of Ightfield, Knight, and to the virtuous Lady, Madam Anne his beloved wife and to the right worshipful Sir Arthur, their son and heir, carver to Prince Henry, Prince of Wales".

tells Macro that "this water shall revenge / The tyrant's wrongs" (V.viii.53-4), then says to Tiberius's face: "Tiberius: / You monster tyrant" (V.x.34-5). By the time the play was published, Jonson had courted trouble over his play *Sejanus His Fall* (1603), which is based on Roman history and offers a sharp focus on tyranny. The anonymous playwright of *The Tragedy of Claudius Tiberius Nero* puts in the mouth of Caligula a summing-up which is terrifying in its blandness: "There Nero, the hate of Rome lies butcherèd, / He reigned no day, but some were murdered" (V.x.39-40).

The emphasis on Tiberius's tyranny would have been particularly pointed because there is a potential parallel between the ascension of James VI of Scotland to the throne of England after the death of Elizabeth and that of Tiberius, the adopted son of Augustus. That such a comparison does indeed lurk in the text is suggested by the fact that we are explicitly invited to think of England when this play, unusually for a Roman play, offers complicity in the Brutus myth by twice referring to "Troynovaunt" (I.i.141, 156), which Tiberius includes among a group of "goodly Cities" (I.i.156). Scotland too seems to be glanced at when Drusus and Nero, starving in captivity, eat each other's arms (V.vi.15SD), since Boece records that early in the fifteenth century the Duke of Rothesay, heir to the Scottish throne, had grown so desperate while in captivity that he had eaten his own hands. Duke of Rothesay was one of the titles of James's eldest son Prince Henry (not yet created Prince of Wales), so the history of previous holders of the dukedom might have been of fresh interest. At the same time, though, there is also a nod to literary tradition when Caligula admits that he gathered and stored poisonous water for the sole purpose of taking his revenge on Tiberius for killing his father, Germanicus; this links him to Hamlet, Hoffman and Vindice, who all seek revenge for the death of a father, and so aligns the play with the mainstream of English tragedy in the seventeenth century.

What differentiates *Claudius Tiberius Nero* from these other plays is its Roman setting. There is some residue of the traditional incrimination of Catholicism: Sejanus warns Julia, "Then, Julia, make your quick confession" (III.iv.34), a word which roots the play within beliefs of the Catholic Church. It is also suggestive that Julia is subsequently killed by a poisoned pomegranate: the pomegranate formed part of Catherine of Aragon's coat of arms and was accepted into English heraldry when she married King Henry VIII in 1509,

and it was Henry's divorce from Catherine which inaugurated the English Reformation; the pomegranate has also been portrayed in many religious paintings alongside Mary, the mother of God[2]. Much more strongly developed, though, is a quite different association, that between Rome and homosexuality: William Lithgow observed on his visit to Padua that "beastly Sodomy, it is as rife heere as in Rome, Naples, Florence". Lithgow (1640: 257) calls Rome the new Sodom – "Tibris runneth through the new Sodome"– and names the capital the "second Sodome" (p. 14). It was well known that King James had male favourites, and the political message given by the playwright is, we suggest, a sinister one, which indicts the favourite as dangerously ambitious and a danger to society. At the heart of the play lies the relationship between the emperor Tiberius and his favourite Sejanus. On the surface, it is a close one; audience members hear words of affection, devotion and loyalty from both Tiberius and Sejanus, though their words mask darker motives. However, it is a relationship which turns both men into poisoners and also leads to a reversal of gender roles, as Tiberius becomes a bearer of poisoned fruit and Sejanus is emasculated by his own ambitious lust for power by succumbing to the role of minion and *confidante* for Tiberius. Ultimately, it destroys both of them.

The way in which this happens can be clearly seen from a brief account of the plot of the play, which is in any case not well known and will therefore bear introduction. *The Tragedy of Claudius Tiberius Nero* opens at the funeral of the emperor Augustus, an emperor who, we are told by the Third Plebeian, "was a goodly man" (I.ii.10). Nerva states that "Tiberius, the true heir / Of great Augustus [was] by adoption" (I.i.77-8) chosen to be Augustus's successor, which we gather was due principally to the intrigues of his mother Julia, Augustus's wife.[3] Nevertheless, Tiberius's

[2] For instance, see *Madonna della melagrana* by Sandro Botticelli and *Madonna col bambino* (o *Madonna della melagrana*) by Lorenzo di Credi or Leonardo da Vinci.

[3] As the names of Drusus and Nero are overused in the play and may become confusing for the reader, and for the purposes of clarity, we use the following names when discussing the characters in the play: TIBERIUS – emperor; JULIA – the wife of Augustus is normally known as Livia, but the playwright has chosen to call her Julia, though she is also referred to as Augusta; DRUSUS NERO – also referred to as Drusus and Drusus Tiberius in the play; son of Tiberius; LIVIA – usually spelt Livilla (but not in this play); wife to Drusus Nero, granddaughter of Julia and

nephew Germanicus informs us that he himself is "heir by nature" (II.i.49), and more favoured by the Plebeians and Centurions to be emperor as they declare that they "shall never see [Augustus's] like in Rome, unless Germanicus might be our Emperor" (I.ii.12-3). Germanicus returns to Rome in victorious glory from Germany and is crowned with garlands amongst cheers and adulation. Tiberius, disliking Germanicus, sends him to fight in Armenia, which takes him away from Rome and also eliminates the threat he poses to Tiberius's security. Tiberius then plots with his mother Julia and Sejanus, his favourite, to send Piso to poison Germanicus in Armenia. Meanwhile the ambitious Sejanus plots and manipulates Tiberius into poisoning Tiberius's own son Drusus Nero because of a grudge Sejanus held against him. Agrippina learns of the death of her husband Germanicus and his heart is returned to her in a box, after which Tiberius forces her to eat a poisoned apple. Two of Germanicus's sons, Drusus and Nero, are imprisoned and starved to death. Livia, the eldest daughter of Germanicus, commits suicide by throwing herself down a well, and Caligula poisons Tiberius. While Tiberius lies in agony, Caligula smothers him with a sheet before stabbing him, announcing that he does so "That I may get Rome's royal Empery, / And to eternal glory of renown, / I was a fool, but all to get the crown" (V.x.77-9) – that is, he, like Hamlet, has pretended to be feeble-minded, a strategy which in this instance is successful. As if this were not enough murders for one play, there are strong suggestions from Tiberius's mother, Julia, that she, Sejanus and Tiberius plotted the death of the emperor Augustus between them to enable Tiberius to ascend to the position of emperor. In an aside, Julia admits her part in the plot: "Say that he [Tiberius] was Augustus' murderer, / Yet therein Julia, you were counsellor" (I.ii.47-8). The play ends as it began, with an emperor murdered by a male poisoner and the murderer becoming the next emperor.

Four years before the publication of *Claudius Tiberius Nero*, Jonson used the character of Sejanus to draw attention to Queen Elizabeth I's favourite Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, and to the similarities of the Queen's court with the court of Tiberius.

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eldest daughter of Germanicus; AGRIPPINA – wife of Germanicus; DRUSUS, NERO AND CALIGULA – sons of Germanicus and Agrippina; SEJANUS – counsellor and favourite of Tiberius; MACRO – lieutenant to Sejanus; SPADO – servant to Sejanus.

Within both Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall* and *Claudius Tiberius Nero*, attention is drawn to the dangers of favourites and sycophants who ingratiate themselves with the monarchy but are secretly ambitious and feign friendships to gain whatever power they can, possibly even harbouring ambitions to usurp their masters. In *The Tragedy of Claudius Tiberius Nero*, such behaviour is specifically and repeatedly connected to poisoning. Curtis Perry (2006: 95) notes that "It is a curious truth about Tudor and early Stuart England that any royal favourite of sufficient longevity and influence to attract resentment tends to have been accused, in the most spectacularly public manner possible, of using poison", as in 1626 when George Eglisham publicly vilified George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham, a well-known favourite of James I, in a scathing attack:

> of the counsell, of the kings court, of the courtes of iustice to his violent pleasure, and as his ambitious villanie moueth him. […] To obtaine iustice he may dispaire, to provoke the Duke to send forth a poisoner or other murtherer to dispetch him, and send him after his dead freinds allready murthered, he may be sure this to be the euent. (Eglisham 1626: Biv-B2r)

Eglisham goes on to voice his own contempt on the use of poison as a weapon to murder:

> Therfor of all iniuries, of all the actes of iniustice, and of all things most to be looked into, murther is the greatest, and of all murthers the poysoning vnder trust aud profession of freindship, is the most haynous. (sig. Biv)

In *Claudius Tiberius Nero*, as soon as Tiberius accepts the crown, there are whispers of murder and talk of poison, with hints that the death of Augustus may not have been by natural causes. Tiberius begins the role of Emperor by trying to engage the populace of Rome while hiding his true nature by feigning an outward show of piety, wisdom and self-deprecation (the first of several ways in which the play glances at *Richard III*). However, the attempt backfires. Wishing to appear grief-stricken for the death of Augustus, he "feigns weeping" (I.i.121SD) and also "feigns to swoon" (I.i.14SD), which Nerva, who closely observes the actions of Tiberius, construes as public spectacles of weakness, calling them evidence of "Feminine waywardness [from an] inconstant mind" (I.i.67). Nerva here provides the audience with a key signpost, because as

emperor of Rome Tiberius is consistently represented as feminised and emasculated, in ways that are connected with his use of poison. Indeed apart from Germanicus, all the men in the play are presented as cowards who instruct other males to use poison for them; although Sejanus and Tiberius use poison to kill, it is the minions who carry out the actual poisonings. Sejanus supplies Piso with poison to kill Germanicus and gives Spado poison to kill Tiberius and Drusus; and Caligula employs Macro to poison Tiberius. The use of poison is thus firmly connected to the idea of ties between men.

What makes poison so alluring to the poisoner is that it is subtle, quiet, non-confrontational and can, if desired, be carried out without the help of another person. The promise of poison is that it will deliver catastrophic damage to the victim and will always guarantee death. A poisoner needs to show careful planning and stealth to administer poison to a victim; there is also a certain amount of sadism attached to the process of using poison, which highlights the poisoner's sinister, cold-hearted nature as they select who shall live and who shall die. In the play there are six male poisoners: Tiberius, Sejanus, Spado, Piso, Macro and Caligula. In addition to all choosing poison to murder, they all display cowardice. Poison emasculates males and calls into question their masculinities and manhoods. Poison by virtue of its stealth robs the male of his manhood and effeminises him, implicating him in the link between the female and sin, which goes back to the first female, Eve. Eve was beguiled by the serpent to entice Adam with the forbidden fruit, bringing sin into the world by providing tainted food. John Abott (1623: 64) uses a suggestive image for this act: for him, the apple "Hath many poysons, [and] many Hels in it", and Eve herself was "a cursed tree". *Claudius Tiberius Nero* is rich in tree imagery: Germanicus and his sons are described by Tiberius as "gallant blossoms of the goodly stem" (I.i.127), for Asinius "Jewry" is characterised by its "palms" as Italy by its vines (I.i.38-9), and Germanicus laments the turning of "Minerva's olive to the myrtle tree, / Apollo's laurel, into Bacchus' vine" (II.i.11-2). In this garden, though, it is Tiberius, not any of the female characters, who proffers poisoned fruit, as Macro forewarns Agrippina:

Nero will hither come under pretext
To comfort, but to try your patience.

He has an apple in such syrup dipped,
Which he in kindness means to offer you:
If you accept, accept a present death. (V.v.46-50)

Tiberius, like Eve, is a provider of dangerous food that carries death within it, as he instructs a servant to "open her mouth and feed her" (V.v.177); he watches his daughter-in-law being physically force-fed by a male servant as he encouragingly commands "No, cram her then, and feed her fat withal" (V.v.181). This barbaric and violent act of penetration is an intrusion that is not sanctioned by Agrippina, and therefore could be considered tantamount to a rape; moreover, Tiberius is not the only male witnessing what is taking place. The stage direction tells us that Tiberius enters with his attendants Spurius and Nerva, who are therefore also present, and who are then followed by Macro and Caligula. It can only be assumed that these males are on the stage at the same time and are also witnesses to the cruel treatment of Agrippina, but it must also be noted that none of them defend or try to protect her; only Nerva sighs a small comment of discontent to Tiberius: "Ah, Nero, Nero" (V.v.184). This all-male onstage audience function in effect as voyeurs, underlining the extent to which Agrippina's victimhood is a function of her gender, and yet at the same time Tiberius's own masculinity is undermined by his use of the apple.

Tiberius is not the only male to cross the boundaries into the female role of poisoned food-giver. The association of food and poison is again illustrated when Sejanus tricks Tiberius into believing his son Drusus Nero is about to poison him with a feast he has organised:

Drusus, your dear son,
Aspires to be a present Emperor:
[…] this day he makes a feast,
Where mighty Caesar, should be poisoned.
[…] Spado, that twig soon bent to it,
Is now corrupted to perform the act,
Who tasting first unto your Majesty,
With a vine-branch enfolded on his arm
Will squeeze in poisonous drugs to slay my Lord. (V.i.142-50)

Sejanus accuses Drusus Nero of using the cover of a feast to conceal the poisonous drugs under a "vine-branch" that can be "squeezed"

by hand onto the food of Tiberius. Moreover, the word "twig" links Spado to the tree imagery in the play and associates him too with Eve, females and poisonous food. The sense of men functioning as women is also underlined by the marked lack of femininity of the actual women in the play: the playwright shows the only three female characters in the play not as mother, wife or daughter but as self-haters wishing to destroy the very parts of their anatomy that distinguish them as female. Livia tells us that she would love to "unrip [her] breast" (II.iii.203), and Julia refers to "my womb, / Which now I hate" (III.vi.7-8).

It is not only through his association with poison that Tiberius strays from the norms of manhood; in his relationship with Sejanus, the play hints at sodomy. Mario DiGangi states that the word sodomite

> meant more than "a man who has sex with another man". The label also meant that this particular man was treacherous, monstrous, heretical, and so on, and that he shared these defining traits with other deviants who may or may not have participated in same-sex relations. (DiGangi 1997: 4)

Although Tiberius and Sejanus are not portrayed as sodomites in the sexual sense, they share intimate moments through their language; and although both are villains, both hide their villainy under the cloak of close friendship. In doing so, they recall another pair of male friends. Sejanus likens himself to "a discoloured chameleon" (II.ii.72). The chameleon imagery links this play to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; as Hamlet is asked by Claudius how he "fares", Hamlet replies, "Excellent, i'faith; of the chameleon's dish" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.ii.93). Tiberius is also chameleonic: he is changeable and inconstant, another of several points of similarity with *Hamlet*. Julia speaks of Hecuba (I.iv.101-2), and one of the gifts she offers Sejanus to bribe him to kill Tiberius is a picture of Tiberius's father, which we can safely presume to be a miniature since Sejanus shows it to Tiberius (V.i.125). Finally Caligula, like Hamlet, puts on an antic disposition to disguise his intention to avenge his father's death. However, what makes Hamlet different from Tiberius, Sejanus and Caligula is that Hamlet may feign madness but he does not feign his repentance at murdering the innocent Polonius. None of the male poisoners in *Claudius Tiberius Nero* actually repents his murders.

Sejanus does say "I am sorry" (V.i.245) after the death of Drusus, but then goes on to add "that you [Drusus] were heir to Tiberius" (V.i.33) and "[you were an] observer of my secrecies" (V.i.34), implicitly accepting that the killing was inevitable and suggesting that he would therefore presumably not wish it undone.

Tiberius and Sejanus do, though, seem to feel something real for each other. Although Sejanus is depicted as a manipulating and poisonous liar, he is capable of using the language of love, devotion and loyalty, but it is only Tiberius who can elicit it. When alone with Tiberius on the stage Sejanus is depicted as being at ease and confidently articulate, especially when trying to convince Tiberius of his love and devotion. The private conversations Tiberius and Sejanus share are certainly more convincing than Sejanus's feeble attempts to woo Livia in Act II, when his opening lines addressed to Livia appear awkward, stilted and contrived. He takes so long to get to the point that Livia dismisses whatever he wishes to say to her: "By these your long circumlocutions, / Your business is of small import with me" (II.iii.152), to which Sejanus can reply only with the feeble, "Of more import, sweet Lady, than my life" (II. iii.153). There is a parallel here with *Richard III*, as there is too when Tiberius uses his skill with words to coax Sejanus into murdering Nero and Drusus, the sons of Germanicus, in a way similar to that in which Richard tries to persuade Buckingham to kill his nephews secured in the Tower of London, though Sejanus is neither a Buckingham nor a Richard. Paul Dean (1984: 213-4) believes that in this scene Sejanus wins over the affections of Livia, and that Sejanus "begins to delude" Livia into believing that he loves her, after which he tells her that it is she who has the power to "salve his malady" (II.iii.157); for Dean, Livia pities his affliction and shows him hope when she says "God send you ease, adieu" (II.iii.162). We argue that Sejanus has not deceived Livia, but is instead deluding himself. She astutely sees through his pantomime to declare that he is "wonderfully metamorphosed!" (II.iii.169), which strongly suggests that Sejanus plays the lover out of character from his normal self. As she is desperate to escape his presence she curtly asks him to "Be brief" (II.iii.183). Sejanus then tries to win Livia with flattery but she stops him abruptly: "No, then I am gone if you begin to praise" (II.iii.186). Sejanus resorts to violence by grabbing hold of Livia and attempting to kiss her. Livia's utter

abhorrence at being detained in such a manner by Sejanus is made very clear in the violent imagery of her language: "Let go my hand, or I will have your head" (II.iii.199). Sejanus tells her that his heart is "in your lovely but obdurate breast" (II.iii.201), but Livia will have none of him, and in a last desperate retort at his advances, she informs him that she would rather "unrip [her] breast and tear it [his heart] out" (II.iii.203). Livia shows utter revulsion at the thought of having the metaphorical heart of Sejanus inside her body; this is not the language nor the actions of a woman won over by the advances of a lover. Curiously, Dean interprets Livia's revulsion and attempts at protecting herself against such violent and aggressive actions as "show[ing] the woman behaving in a way unnatural for her sex, threatening to stab the man instead of yielding and kissing him" (Dean 1984: 214). We disagree with Dean's assumption that Livia is like Lady Anne in *Richard III* in that "Both women are reluctant to admit they have been won, and are forced to temporize, stressing hope rather than promise" (p. 214). After a long scene in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Lady Anne does accept a ring from Richard, but the language Livia uses is far from that of a woman wooed by the clumsy words, swooning, tears and boorish attempts at courtship made by Sejanus. She says, "Your business is of small import with me" (II.iii.152) and quickly wishes to leave his company: "God send you ease, adieu" (II.iii.162). Just twenty lines further on she repeats her request: "Farewell Sejanus, I must leave you now" (II.iii.182). Sejanus begs one word more as Livia tells him to "Be brief Sejanus then" (II.iii.182); this shows that she is polite but does not seek his company. She calls him a "Villain" (II.iii.197), demands that he not touch her – "Let go my hand" (II.iii.199) – and even threatens to stab him: "She pulls his rapier" (II.iii.209SD). She does offer Sejanus some compassion and concern when he swoons, but she shows no signs of being deceived or succumbing to his schoolboy attempts at winning her affections; as she leaves him, she categorically states that she "will not promise" (II.iii.245) him any hope. Livia, though, is not the only one who is not keen, because before leaving the stage Sejanus confirms his abhorrence at the thoughts of any sexual contact with Livia or any other female; he confesses that he does not actually intend to "adulterate a prince's bed" (II.iii.250) and admits that it is "Not lust nor love" (II.iii.251) that are inside his head.

However, Sejanus proves he is able to articulate the language of love and devotion more effectively than this when he and Tiberius are alone together. During these private moments Sejanus appears more comfortable and confident in his use of language and not clichéd, stilted or awkward. Tiberius says "If that Sejanus loves Tiberius, ever Nero did repay his love" (III.iv.44-5) and later exhorts him "Speak, my Sejanus" (V.i.67). Sejanus replies "Yet would Sejanus, like Briareus, / Have been embowelled in this earthy hell, / To save the life of great Tiberius" (V.i.35-7). There may be no real love or affection between the two, as is exposed in their asides, but the language used by Tiberius and Sejanus shows that both master and minion have a necessity for each other verging on co-dependence. That their relationship is in fact a homoerotic one is suggested when the playwright has them liaise in a secret cave, evoking Christopher Marlowe's *Dido Queen of Carthage*, where the first encounter between Dido and Aeneas takes place in a cave. Suetonius (*The Twelve Caesars*, 39) tells us that Tiberius used a natural rock grotto/ cave at Sperlonga, and once while dining there he was nearly killed by falling rocks, but makes no mention of Sejanus being present. In *Claudius Tiberius Nero*, however, it is Sejanus who apparently saves Tiberius from death in the cave: when Julia plans an accident, Sejanus promises to help her, but resolves in soliloquy that

> The cave shall fall, and yet Tiberius, live,
> But I will seem to under-prop the cave,
> With these my pillars, and bear all the load.
> So shall I get more favour with the Prince. (III.vi.132-5)

Not giving any thoughts to the false promise made to placate Julia, Sejanus grasps instead at an opportunity that will give him even "more favour" with Tiberius. After his escape from the cave collapse, Tiberius gushes his love to Sejanus:

> Not Theseus' love unto Pirithous,
> Not Alexander's to Hæphestion
> Nor the two brothers of Paris sworn,
> That in eternal courses scale the heavens.
> Did ever manifest such demonstrations
> Of faith unfeigned, and more than Turtle-dove,
> Saved my life […]

Ah, my Sejanus, what can Nero find
To counterbalance such a faithful mind? (V.i.14-20, 39-40)

Here Tiberius compares his love by using male-male examples that are charged with homoerotic suggestion. Tiberius subordinates Sejanus by using the phrase "turtle-dove", a term of affection usually used between male and female, not male to male. He sighs, "Ah, my Sejanus", which emphasises an intensity of passion felt, and the male-male love and friendship between Theseus and Pirithous directly insinuates homoerotic desires: Bruce Smith (1994: 33) points out that "Pirithous and Theseus admire […] each other's beauty". Alexander and Hephaestion provide another example of famous homosexual lovers. By giving Tiberius such a speech the playwright insinuates a relationship between him and Sejanus that is more than just that of master and minion. In Sejanus's reply to Tiberius, he is equally demonstrative:

Most gracious Caesar, mighty Emperor.
Had Pelion and Ossa been conjoined,
Had mounting Tenarus with the snowy alps,
And high Olympus overwhelmed the cave,
Yet would Sejanus, like Briareus
Have been embowelled in this earthy hell,
To save the life of great Tiberius. (V.i.31-7)

Briareus was a famous giant and son of Coleus and Terra; he was believed to have had one hundred hands and fifty heads and was thrown under Mount Etna for assisting the giants in their war against the gods. Sejanus chooses mountains to express his love and devotion, and in doing so again recalls *Hamlet*, where Laertes wants the gravedigger to "o'ertop old Pelion" (V.i.246), and Hamlet urges him to "Make Ossa like a wart" (V.i.278). Hamlet and Laertes, however, are talking about Ophelia; here the love object is not female but male. The outward display of mutual verbal affection between the two men is heavily laced with homoeroticism and does suggest a closer male bond than simple homosociality.

Sejanus also seems to have had a bond at one time with Tiberius's son, Drusus Nero. However, for some reason not disclosed by Sejanus, Drusus Nero gave Sejanus a box on the ears that wounded his male pride and was an affront to his manhood. Alexandra

Shepherd (2003: 144) states that a box on the ear was "a staple of household discipline more appropriate for chastising subordinates by masters"; as heir to the throne, Drusus Nero may have been articulating by actions his high social status, claiming his right to outrank Sejanus and put him firmly in his place. Sejanus's pride was damaged by the action, and not being able to withstand the indignity or the disrespect shown to him, he carried the hurt inside until he was able to take revenge. However, there was something else besides dented pride and a loss of power, as Sejanus declares "Oh, how I feared I should have been betrayed" (V.i.183), a tantalisingly obscure statement that obviously invites speculation, and describes Drusus Nero as "an observer of my secrecies" (V.ii.235). Sejanus swears to avenge this affront in Act II, but it is not until Act V that he actually sets about determining the fate of Drusus Nero, using as his instrument his own minion Spado. In his implacable quest for vengeance, Sejanus devises the ultimate revenge plot by planning to have Drusus Nero drink poison while he stands by and watches. To make the pleasure of the poisoning even sweeter he devises that it should be Tiberius who should be the one to administer the poison to his own innocent son. First, in true villainous fashion, Sejanus plays a game with Tiberius, throwing him tantalising pieces of information to encourage his appetite for more information concerning his son Drusus Nero: "May it please your Majesty to give me leave, / Here to set down a doleful period" (V.i.101-2). He tells him that what he knows may not be the truth: "For on my honour I do think it forged" (V.i.155). This phrase is repeated several times as Sejanus appears to enjoy reeling in Tiberius's curiosity. It also gives Sejanus control over Tiberius until he is finally deceived and ensnared into murdering his own son. During the course of this scene and within 155 lines Sejanus repeats this phrase five times to Tiberius. (The same technique is of course used by Shakespeare in another Roman play, *Julius Caesar*, when, in III.ii, Antony repeats that Brutus is an "honourable man" five times in one speech, and several times throughout the whole scene.) Tiberius's response is typical of the insecure paranoid tyrant he is portrayed to be: he threatens to "teach him homage to his sovereign. / How dare the straggling elf once look on me, / And not be turned into an aspen leaf, / To tremble at each breathed syllable?" (V.i.159-62). The image of the delicate aspen leaf that easily quivers with the slightest breeze

demonstrates Tiberius's illusions of power, dominance and tyranny, as well as suggesting a contrast with James's preferred image of the cedar. Sejanus stands back to watch and enjoy the scene he has created and carefully throws in tit-bits of verbal poison, showing him to be a malicious and venomous character, created by the playwright to highlight the dangers of ambitious servants and monarchs who are vulnerable to the machinations of favourites.

In Act V the audience is privy to Sejanus's true feelings about the murder of Drusus Nero; concealed deep within him they are given air in a brooding yet revealing and sexually ambiguous soliloquy:

> Why this is well, Germanicus is gone
> With Julia and with Drusus into hell.
> Follow, Sejanus, know your wits I mean.
> Alas, poor Drusus, truth I pity you,
> And Spado too, I think now I could weep,
> But that it is too womanly: this chopping boy
> Whom I corrupted for this stratagem,
> I did him a great favour, had he lived
> Tiberius would have had him tortured,
> Hanged by the navel for confession.
> Drusus, for you I could have wished your life,
> But reason did enforce your destiny.
> First, that you were heir to Tiberius,
> Next, observer of my secrecies, […]
> Fourthly, the blow which I received in peace,
> Until revenge might satisfy my will;
> All these, or any were sufficient.
> I am sorry; I have used you too, too well. (V.ii.222-45)

In this soliloquy Sejanus displays for the only time in the play feelings of remorse for his actions; this is shown towards both Drusus Nero and Spado. Sejanus admits that he "used [Drusus Nero] too, too well" and "corrupted" Spado. The word "used" connotes exploitation, taking advantage and gratifying some desire on the youth. Alone on the stage Sejanus addresses the dead Drusus Nero with what appears to be true sentiment and emotion: "Drusus, for you I could have wished your life". Sejanus discloses that he and Drusus Nero shared intimacies, calling him "an observer of my secrecies", proof that there was a special affinity between the two males. Sejanus ends with what appear to be sincere and contrite

words ("I am sorry"), before going on to admit, "I could weep, / But that it is too womanly". This admission reinforces the idea of Sejanus keeping up the façade of manliness, unwilling to allow his real feelings to be seen by the patriarchal society that views tears as "womanly" and enforces and controls male sexuality; tears would make his manliness "womanly" and would also raise suspicions in their dark suggestiveness of a homosexual relationship. Here Sejanus shows in his isolation a deeply private face to the audience, hiding his suffering and weeping from the oppressive male-dominated society of Rome, because he is afraid of being viewed as weak, inferior and woman-like.

Sejanus also discloses that he took the life of the "chopping boy" Spado as a great favour to him, because he would have suffered torture at the hands of Tiberius and would have been "Hanged by the navel". One has to question why, after proving he can be extremely callous, Sejanus would care whether death was quick or slow for Spado[4], whether the "chopping boy" should meet his end without pain or suffer torture at the hands of Tiberius, but it adds to the sense of Sejanus as a "discoloured chameleon" (II.ii.72), hiding behind a façade yet implying that his true colours are tainted, stained and spoiled. Like the chameleon, too, he is dependent on his environment, which governs how he appears, and in this he shows the characteristic trademarks of the Machiavellian villain. Fred B. Tromly (1998: 104) observes that "the dominant attitude was to depict Machiavellianism as a lethal Continental disease which must be kept out of the innocent, enclosed world of England at all costs"; through the characters of both Tiberius and Sejanus, and the hint of a parallel with James and his favourites, the playwright suggests that the *cordon sanitaire* has been breached and that Machiavellianism is already at large in London.

Suggestions of villainy, homosexuality and emasculation are also supplemented by suggestions of godlessness as the apocalyptic finale of the play approaches, and these too work to suggest a failure of masculinity. The playwright uses inventive ways for Tiberius to mete out death to characters that are seen as a threat to his position as emperor, and one of them is the repeated use of crowns. Both

[4] Spado's name carries two meanings: see *Oxford English Dictionary*, "spado, *n. 1*, A eunuch; a castrated person; spado, *n. 2*, A cut-and-thrust sword".

Germanicus and Sejanus are killed by crowns, a motif possibly borrowed from Henry Chettle's play *The Tragedy of Hoffman*, which was performed in 1602. The crown is a strong symbol of kingship, authority and power, and in the Renaissance was believed to come with the divine approval of God; it also has strong associations with the suffering of Christ on the cross, and because of this could easily be associated with the distinctively Catholic crucifix. Jesus was given a painful crown to wear, a mock symbol of kingship; so too did Germanicus and Sejanus have painful crowns placed upon their heads that would mock their ambitions, authority and claims to the crown; and like Jesus Christ, their crowns would also bring them great suffering and ultimate death. Piso is persuaded to kill Germanicus because Germanicus had refused him the crown of honour. Piso believes that his manhood has been publicly humiliated and he desperately needs to defend it; for him the crown represents valour, courage and bravery, and should by rights be placed on his head: "The crown of honour that I have deserved" (IV.i.212). Germanicus has a different interpretation of events and humiliates Piso by disparaging his manhood, declaring that he is all talk: "His deeds, alack, are tongue-tied orators" (IV.i.190). He continues to mock the account given by Piso of his participation in the battle by saying "that Piso, by some postern gate, / Crept through a mews and by the winding stairs, / Panting and breathless, stole up to the walls" (IV.i.204-6). "Panting and breathless" implies that Piso is unsuitable for action and unworthy to perform the duties of a soldier; "crept" insinuates that he was sneaky, avoided being noticed, and links to his servile actions, his wanting to please Sejanus and gain favour with the emperor Tiberius. The idea of Piso entering by a "postern gate" is also an image with obvious connotations of sodomy. The accusation of cowardice is borne out when Piso chooses the easy option of poison to kill Germanicus rather than fight him in one-to-one combat, man to man: "Piso at the other end of the stage sprinkles powder on the crown, and then he sets it on Germanicus' head" (IV.i.228SD). Vengeful and full of spite, Piso declares "that crown shall be the last [he] ever shall wear, / [because it] […] decks [his] speedy funeral".

The motif of the crown resurfaces in the final scenes of the play when Sejanus becomes a dispensable irritation. Sejanus has run his useful course for Tiberius; he has been empowered, therefore his

presence is now a threat to Tiberius's status as emperor. Sejanus too is killed by a crown, this time a burning one, used in a barbaric parody of what he desired the most, to be emperor. Sejanus seals his fate when he warns Tiberius that he will "from your hand rend the imperial crown" (V.iv.101), calling him "lunatic usurper of the crown" (V.iv.19) and telling him, "My right as good as yours is to the crown, / For both but false, and both but villainy" (V.iv.22-23). The word "false" means that neither has a rightful claim to the throne, but could also refer to the way they have conducted themselves with each other and with others; both have been villainous and cruel in their schemes and murders. Tiberius taunts and ridicules Sejanus with the words, "I do resign my crown imperial / Unto Sejanus, and do invest him Caesar. / All hail, Sejanus! Rome's great emperor" (V.iv.131-2), as he orders a burning crown to be placed on the head of Sejanus: "Enter Spurius with a burning crown" (V.iv.126SD), in an obvious parody of the crown of thorns placed as a gesture of mockery on the head of Christ as he is hailed as King of the Jews.

The motif of the crown could also, though, have another potential resonance, inviting the audience to think not only of heavenly but also of earthly kings. When Tiberius dies at the hands of Caligula, the play ends not on a note of resolution and hope, but with another male poisoner in the role of emperor of Rome, suggesting that the taking of favourites results in a cycle of problems for the state. Tanya Pollard (2005: 9) comments that "Playwrights themselves saw the theater not only as a vehicle for representing drugs and poisons, but as a kind of drug or poison itself"; this toxic tragedy ends mirroring its beginning, with the murder of an emperor and the murderer usurping the throne, and thus implies an unbroken cyclical pattern of contamination, injudicious rule and Romish poison, which could implicitly leach out from the play into early modern London, where the audience might find some real-life favourites who were imagined as potentially able to turn into poisoners. One wonders whether the playwright lived to know how apt that warning would prove when in 1613, six years after the play's publication, Anne Turner, the maid of the play's dedicatee Sir Arthur Mannering, procured the poison which killed Sir Thomas Overbury.

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