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Abjection as a Means of Social and Political Dominance in Tacitus's *The Annals*

Britannicus...confidently launched into some verse in which there were allusions to his own removal from his father's home and from supreme power...Awareness of the ill-will he had himself incurred increased Nero's hatred...He...set to work in secret and ordered a poison be prepared.

Britannicus was given his first dose of poison by his very own tutors, but because of a bowel movement he excreted it – it was too weak, or perhaps had been diluted...a [new] poison was brewed close to the emperor's bedroom.

It was the custom for emperors' children to take their meals sitting with the other young nobles at their own...There Britannicus was dining. Britannicus was handed a drink that was innocuous, and also very hot, and which had gone through the tasting process. Then, when it was refused because of its heat, poison was added in some cold water, and that spread so effectively through the boy's body that the power to speak and breathe were both taken from him. There was alarm amongst those sitting around him, and the less discerning scattered; but those with a keener understanding remained fast in their seats, staring at Nero...But from Agrippina, for all her efforts to control her expression, came a fleeting glance of such panic and confusion.

-Tacitus, *The Annals*, Book 13, Chapters 15-16, Pages 277-278

The Annals, by Tacitus, relates the history of the Roman Empire spanning from the reign of Tiberius to the rule of Nero, with the latter portion of the book focusing primarily on Nero – specifically the atrocities he committed against both his family and his citizens during his time as emperor. Consequently, the sections of the book which detail his life are comprised of murder, egomaniacal actions, and ploys to exert control via force – each of which stem from a singular motivation: eliminating opposition to his claim to the role of emperor. All of this is seen in the excerpt above, in which Nero, upon feeling threatened by him, kills his step-brother, Britannicus, after having previously removed him from his rightful place within the palace. The diction and imagery employed by Tacitus when writing this scene serves to emphasize the categorization of Britannicus as “other,” merely something Nero has cast away from himself and now perceives as abject, a term which refers to something which has been cast off from oneself in an effort to

remove it from one's sense of self, or something which transgresses boundaries or the order of law or the natural world. It also refers the human reaction that occurs as a result of any of the previous definitions of the abject. Furthermore, this passage implies that the act of abjection itself is something that is tied inherently to power, and thus can be used in an attempt to prove one's dominance and masculinity as well as to further one's political agenda by taking advantage of the fear and discomfort it elicits in others.

The event which sparks Nero's desire to kill his step-brother occurs during a gathering Nero's hosts, at which, when prompted to speak, Britannicus alludes "to his own removal from his father's home and from supreme power" (Tacitus 13.15). Here, "removal" refers to both "the action of removing or taking...away" (OED), as well as "the action of dismissing a person from a position or...overthrowing a political leader" (OED). Consequently, it becomes apparent that Nero casts out his step-brother, thus separating him from himself by removing him from their once shared home and turning the palace into a border between the two. This also marks Britannicus as "other," making him the abject of his step-brother, explaining Nero's feelings of anger and discomfort that arise when this abjection is pointed out to him and the public, as the sight or recognition of the abject often results in "discomfort [and] unease" (Kristeva 10) as well as being seen as "perverse" (Kristeva 15). Additionally, by eliciting feelings of humiliation and discomfort from Nero, Britannicus challenges his status of superiority and violates the impenetrability associated with it – both of which provoke Nero to retaliate and punish his step-brother.

The means by which Nero plans to exact revenge on Britannicus for acknowledging this abjection is by dosing him with poison, a word which describes a "material that causes illness [when ingested]" (OED). Because Britannicus consumes the poison, it penetrates his body. He is

therefore emasculated, as in the society in which he lives one's masculinity is tied intrinsically to their "impenetrability" (Walters 29) as well as their ability to penetrate others. Additionally, the word poison can refer to "a person who exerts a harmful influence [over others]" (OED). This effectively casts Nero as the penetrator, portraying him as the more masculine of the two and asserting his dominance through his violation of the boundaries of Britannicus's body, an act which is, itself, abject since it simultaneously "disturbs identity" (Kristeva 4) and "does not respect borders" (Kristeva 4). Subsequently, Nero's actions – and the consequent societal implications of such actions – serve to insinuate that the actual act of abjection is carried out by the individual in the position of dominance, while the individual whom the abject acts upon or is applied to is, therefore, passive. This, in turn, highlights the ability of abjection to work as a means of attaining or enforcing power, as Nero's intention in removing Britannicus is, presumably, to eliminate any threat as to the legitimacy of his rule as emperor, and therefore further cement his political unconquerability.

This initial assassination attempt from Nero, however, is subverted by Britannicus, who "excreted" (Tacitus 13.15) the poison. Here, excrete means "to separate from the vital fluids" (OED) by means of "discharging from the system" (OED), revealing that Britannicus regains momentary control by casting away the poison in his system, making it abject from himself. Moreover, because "poison" can also refer to an individual with malicious intent, Britannicus also effectively distances himself from Nero. The suggested cause of this excretion, as related by Tacitus, is dilution of the poison, meaning it had been "weakened by the addition of water" (OED), or "reduced in strength" (OED). Since this poison was ordered by Nero, its weakness – coupled with his abjection – reflects directly upon him, and thus its inability to eliminate Britannicus serves as a blow to Nero's masculinity, effeminizing him and instead indicating

Britannicus is the more dominant of the two, transforming the act of abjection into a blatant power struggle between two opposing political figures.

Consequently, Nero soon strikes back at his step-brother, hosting a dinner party during which he arranges for Britannicus to be dosed with an even stronger, more lethal poison. As with the first attempt, this one, too, marks the abjection and emasculation of Britannicus – both of which are heightened by the particular success of this last endeavor, during which “the power to speak and breathe were both taken from him” (Tacitus 13.16), as, in this society, the ability to speak well and openly was a feat associated with masculinity due to linguistic and rhetorical education being limited to male citizens (Walters 29); muteness then, was decidedly feminine. The effects of the poison soon progress to the rest of Britannicus’ body, resulting in his death. As a result, Nero is able to leave no doubt as to his superiority, in addition to prompting the ultimate act of abjection — death. This act of murder works as a poignant form of abjection because it is a “premeditated crime” (Kristeva 4) which “draws attention to the fragility of the law” (Kristeva 4) and thus rejects the natural order of things. Moreover, it also further emphasizes Nero’s dominance, since, as emperor, he is the sole individual who is able to execute or disobey such laws.

The gravity of this criminal abjection is emphasized by the reactions from the other guests in attendance at the dinner party. As the poison spreads throughout Britannicus’s body, Tacitus writes that “there was alarm amongst those sitting around him” (Tacitus 13.16). Alarm here means not only to “make a person feel suddenly frightened or in danger” (OED), but can also mean “to give a signal calling upon people to arm themselves for battle” (OED). This implies that the abjection they are witnessing triggers a subconscious instinct to prepare for the worse, prompting the fight or flight response which simultaneously prompts them to be prepared

to fight. More importantly, the act of abjection is so horrible that they are incapable of processing it without having a negative reaction. Nero's mother, Agrippina, for example, responds similarly, with Tacitus writing that "for all her efforts to control her expression, came a fleeting glance of such panic and confusion" (Tacitus 13.16). Panic is used to describe "fear" (OED) that is "sudden, wild, or unreasoning" (OED), while confusion is a "mental perturbation or agitation [that] prevents the full command of the faculties" (OED). Such a strong reaction from a family member with whom he shares such an intimate bond illustrates the extent to which the abject disrupts the order of everyday life, which often elicits horror and confusion in those who witness it, as it is perceived in a breakdown of subject and object (Kristeva 3).

Because of these strong reactions, those who were "less discerning scattered; but those with a keener understanding remained fast in their seats, staring at Nero" (Tacitus 13.16). Scattered means to "disperse" (OED) or to "cast off" (OED), showing that Nero's forced abjection prompts a series of abjections among his guests, who choose to flee rather than face such a sight or the emotions it produces. Discerning, meanwhile is the act of perceiving, or differentiating by "making a distinction between people or things" (OED), an act which is similar to creating a boundary, thus proving to be the antithesis of objection, which violates or obliterates such borders, and suggesting that those with the ability to distinguish between themselves and the abject are not as prone to panic or horror and therefore superior to those who cannot. However, even among those who recognized that this act was not natural and must have been carried out by Nero, there is some evidence of shock, as they "remained fast" (Tacitus 13.16), or were frozen.

This reason that this abjection is so poignant among everyone is because Britannicus's corpse places them "at the border of [their] condition as [living beings]" (Kristeva 3), thus

reminding them of their respective mortalities and the fragility of both life and the orderliness which is expected to accompany it. This emphasizes the intention of Nero to have this plot serve as a political statement, as everyone in attendance is related to him or Britannicus, or is in possession of significant political status, and therefore are aware of the tension surrounding the two and the legitimacy of Nero's rule. Subsequently, by poisoning his step-brother in front of such a notable audience, he turns his death into not only a spectacle, but a warning to all those watching, as "the body's vulnerabilities can reflect the susceptibility to wounding or dismemberment of the other "bodies" at stake" (Bartsch 10): Nero's guests. This illustrates the symbolic capabilities of the abject, as a single body often represents a larger group or – in this case – a political movement. As a result, Britannicus's death serves as a message to anyone who may have considered him as the son in possession of the true claim to the throne, while Nero was merely an usurper, warning them that, if they did not abandon such notions, they would meet a fate similar to that of Britannicus. It also illustrates what will happen to them if, as Britannicus, they act in a manner that defies the emperor. Concurrently, then, Nero is able to eliminate the opposition and assert full authority by preying upon the response that abjection inspires in others, resulting in a "boundary crisis [concerning] the agency and autonomy of the Roman subjects" (Bartsch 13), and thus leaving them incapable of rebelling against his domineering form of tyranny.

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